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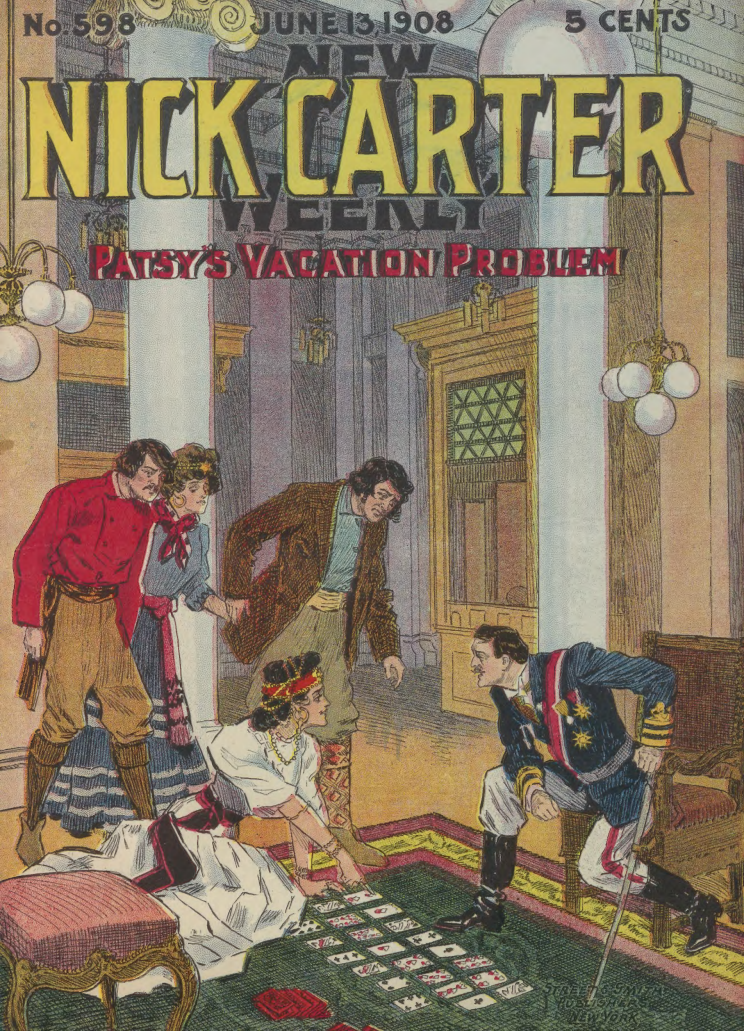
NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

PATSY'S VACATION PROBLEM



NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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Patsy's Vacation Problem;

OR,

Nick Carter's Assistant in a King's Service.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

THE LETTERS FROM ROYALTY.

Nick Carter's second assistant and his wife, Adelina, were indulging in a vacation, for a considerable leave of absence from duty had been granted to Patsy by his chief, and the two had elected to take advantage of it by making a tour of Europe, on pleasure bent.

They had already been absent from New York three weeks, and there still remained five more that were to be devoted to going wheresoever they willed and in doing whatsoever they were pleased to do.

The first week had been consumed by the trip across the Atlantic, the second one had been devoted to seeing the sights of London, and the greater part of the third in making little trips through the country in England.

But at the end of that third week, at a few minutes past seven o'clock in the evening, saw them step from the Pullman to the spacious concrete platform of the beautiful railway-station in the city of Breslin.*

Patsy had wired ahead for accommodation at the Hotel Gretz, and a carriage was waiting to convey them thither; but before entering it, the young detective paused and glanced around him with more than ordinary interest.

"Do you know, Adelina," he said to his wife, "that, with all my knocking about Europe at one time and another, this is the first time that I ever actually set foot upon the pavements of this beautiful city?"

"You could hardly be said to have your feet upon the pavements of it yet," smiled his wife, in reply.

"No; that is true enough, but you know what I mean."

"Certainly."

"I have passed through Breslin several times, and always wished I could stop here and see the place, for I have always heard that it is the most beautiful and, at the same time, the cleanliest city of Europe; and when we started out on this trip I made up my mind that we would devote a week, and possibly two of them, to a visit to this city and the surrounding country."

Adelina smiled indulgently.

* Nick Carter's experiences in this same country may be found related in Nos. 389, 390, and 391 of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY.

"I suppose," she said, "that the fact that you have in your pocket at this minute an invitation from the king himself to visit the city and country had nothing to do with your decision?"

"Certainly it had—everything to do with it. All the same, I was never here before. I have never seen the king, or even her royal highness the Princess Deehra, who is now the wife of Count von Hartzwold; and Count von Hartzwold, as you know, was once Major Richard Hartwell, of the United States Army."

"Of course, I know it, Patricio; you and Nick have discussed it often enough between you. Come, dear, our carriage is waiting, and you are standing here mooning around as if you were a countryman just come to town for the first time."

"I feel very much like that, as a matter of fact."

"Well, I hope it is a pleasanter sensation than the one I have at the present moment."

"Eh? What is that?"

"I'm as hungry as a bear. I haven't eaten a thing since morning; that is, only those sandwiches, you know."

It was a drive of twenty minutes to the Hotel Gretz, which was located on a prominence overlooking the greater part of the city; and as Patsy stepped down from the carriage and turned about to assist Adelina to alight, he said to her:

"*Querida mia*, I wonder who else is due here to-night? There must be something doing, eh? Well, whoever it is that's expected, we're reaping the benefit of it."

A strip of carpet had been laid from the street-curbing across the broad walk and up the wide steps that led to the entrance to the hotel. Footmen in gorgeous livery opened their carriage door and assisted them to alight; two more footmen stood at the base of the wide steps, that were guarded on either side by enormous bronze lions, and these four fell in behind the newly arrived guests, and marched solemnly after them; and, as they mounted the steps, they could see approaching them a man who could be nothing less than the proprietor of the great house, while accompanying him were others, who looked as if they might be respectively the manager and chief clerks of the hotel.

"It must be for us, Patrick," said his wife, with a catch in her breath, for neither of them had looked forward to any such reception as this one was resolving itself into.

Just then they came within speaking-distance of the ponderous bulk of the proprietor, who bowed so low before them that the act was almost a salaam, or a kotow.

"Welcome, sir and madam," he announced, in excellent English. "It is a great honor that your excellencies have conferred upon me by the selection of my unworthy accommodations. If your excellencies will but deign to follow me, I will in person conduct you to the suite of rooms that have been made ready for your accommodation."

Patsy looked around at his wife with the faintest suggestion of a grin on his face, and he deliberately closed one eye, while he murmured, so that none but she could hear him:

"I wonder who in blazes he thinks we are, anyway? Does my appearance suggest a prince of the blood, or perhaps a king?"

"Not a bit, Patsy," she responded, in the same low murmur.

"Then it must be you, my girl. They have taken you for a queen, eh? And, by jingo! they are right about it, too. Your beauty——"

"Oh, hush!"

"All right. I wonder how long a time that fat old party will persevere in his mistake?"

"I don't believe it is a mistake at all. I think they know what they are doing."

"My dear, you're wrong. They are expecting the Emperor of Russia, or the King of England, and they have just naturally fallen into the error that I'm the man. It's my distinguished bearing," and Patsy grinned broadly.

But Adelina's eyes were wide with interest, and they widened perceptibly when she and Patsy were at last ushered into the suite of rooms that had been prepared for them, for here was elegance and sumptuousness, indeed.

Everything there had the appearance of being new, as if it were just installed in the rooms—and there were five of them.

Five rooms for those two young people who could be happier in one, for all they desired was to be together.

But there was a parlor, a dressing-room, two bedrooms, and a sleeping-room for a maid, and there was a bathroom connected with each of the bedrooms; and also the proprietor announced that the adjoining suite was also at their disposal, in case there were too few.

Patsy was on the point of saying something then, to correct the mistake that he supposed had been made, when an officer in uniform stepped into the parlor of

the suite, and, extending a huge square envelope bearing the royal seal, announced:

"From his majesty, the king."

Before Patsy could break the seal, a second officer appeared, and extended another envelope, this time with the announcement:

"From his royal highness, Prince Rupert of Breslin."

Then a third officer appeared, and, clicking his heels in front of Adelina, said:

"From her royal highness Princess Deehra and Countess of Hartzwold." And then a fourth, who also presented his missive to Adelina, announcing:

"From Countess Zita of Strellwitz."

Then the four officers drew themselves up in line together, clicked their heels in a momentary salute—and waited.

"Gentlemen," said Patsy, not knowing what to do or say under the circumstances, and having not the least idea what was the proper procedure for him, "if you will do me the kindness to wait a few moments, until madam and I have learned his majesty's commands, I will not detain you long. In the meantime"—he waved his hand—"won't you be seated?"

Without waiting for a reply, he turned and followed Adelina into the adjoining room, whither she had already disappeared—and where he found her, face down upon the bed, trying with all her might to smother her laughter so that the sound of it would not penetrate to the ears of those messengers.

"Now, will you be good?" she asked her husband, when she had sufficiently recovered. "Have you looked at the superscriptions on these envelopes, Patsy? 'Mr. Patrick Garvan,' 'Madam Garvan.' Do you think now that there has been a mistake?"

"No; but what does it all mean?"

"I would suggest that we read these letters and find out," she replied.

"I don't know that that is a bad idea. I wonder, Adelina, if I should have asked those fellows out there, who brought the letters, to take something? Eh?"

"I think not. I don't know much about such things, but my idea is that, being on royal business, it must be conducted formally to the end."

"Humph! Well, anyhow, I asked them to sit down."

"They won't do it. You will find them all standing exactly as you left them, when you return with your answers to these letters."

"Answers! Holy smoke! You don't suppose I am going to write answers to these things, do you?"

"I'm sure I don't know."

"I might write to the king something like this: 'Dear Billy: Yours received. Yours truly, Patrick Garvan.' How's that?"

"Don't talk nonsense; read your letters. I'm going to read mine."

"Go ahead, then. I think, for about the first time in my life, I'm a little bit frightened."

"What about, Patsy?"

"I don't know; but I'll bet a hundred right now that the chief has put up some sort of a job on us with this kingship and these royal highnesses. Anyhow, it looks like it."

"Nonsense, Patsy! Nothing of the kind. Nick has merely written to apprise them of our coming, and has expressed the hope that we would have opportunities of seeing the beauties of Breslin—or something of that sort; and the king and the prince and all the rest of them are so—so—— What shall I say? So——"

"So stuck on Nick Carter!"

"Well, let it go at that; are so fond of Nick Carter that—that they have done this, to welcome us. I'm going to read my letters, even if you are bent on neglecting yours."

"Oh, I'm not neglecting them; I'm catching my breath. It has been sort of knocked out of me. I suppose, really, Adelina, we ought to open the king's letter first. That is the polite thing to do, isn't it?"

"I suppose it is."

"Well, then, here goes."

CHAPTER II.

FOUR FRIENDS TOGETHER.

The first letter that Patsy opened was written by the private secretary to his majesty, and began with "his majesty directs me to extend to you and Madam Garvan," etc.; after which it went on to say that the freedom of the city was theirs; that his majesty so highly prized the friendship of Nick Carter that any one who was associated with the great detective in any way was surely doubly welcome in Breslin; that his majesty hoped that Mr. and Madam Garvan would consider themselves as guests of the king and the country while they remained; that his majesty desired their presence at the palace itself, during the last week of their stay in Breslin, and that in the meantime Colonel Hensau, of the Palace Guard, had been

relieved from attendance upon the king and was assigned to the care of Mr. and Madam Garvan; and, lastly, that his majesty hoped that his guests would find the accommodations that had been provided for them at the Hotel Gretz, comfortable and satisfactory, and that the king would receive them in person, in his cabinet, the following morning at ten o'clock.

"Wow!" said Patsy. "Wouldn't that steal away your breath? The chief must have succeeded in making the king his eternal debtor, when he was here, to bring about this sort of a reception for us."

"I call it fine," said Adelina. "Read your other letter and then I will read mine."

Patsy's second letter was from Prince Rupert, the king's brother, and had been written, after the manner of that great prince, without formality.

"My dear Mr. Garvan," it said. "It gives me great pleasure to welcome to Breslin one who is so closely in the confidence and affection of my good friend Nicholas Carter. Let me assure you and Madam Garvan of my personal regard and esteem and place myself and my services entirely at your disposal during your stay in our country. His majesty, the king, my august brother, will receive you at the palace to-morrow morning, and it shall be my pleasure to be with him to greet you at the same time." It was signed, "Rupert."

"There is a chap," said Patsy, holding the letter at arm's length and gazing at it, "who is very much after my own heart. I have heard the chief say over and over again that Prince Rupert is about the finest fellow he ever knew. When the chief was here the two called each other Rupert and Nicholas. Now, girl, what are in your letters?"

Adelina had already opened both of them, and now she raised that one from the Princess Deehra, and read aloud:

"'At the Palace—Friday.

"'Dear Madam Garvan: We will need no introduction when we meet, for I have heard much about you from my friend Nicholas Carter, and I have no doubt that he has mentioned the 'Runaway Princess Deehra' many times to you. A written greeting is a cold affair at the best, and I shall save all the pleasant things I wish to say to you until we meet. My husband, Count Richard von Hartzwold, joins me in all expressions of welcome, and bids me remind Mr. Garvan of the fact that they are not unacquainted.

"'Deehra von Hartzwold.'"

"I call that a nice letter," said Patsy. "These people over here are made of pretty good stuff, even if they are majesties and royal highnesses till you can't rest; eh?"

"Yes. Listen to the note from Countess Zita," replied his wife.

"All right. Read it."

"'Dear Madam Garvan: I am not going to write you a lot of set phrases of welcome; I shall call and deliver what I wish to say in person. You may expect me at your rooms at the Hotel Gretz within an hour after your arrival, and I beg that you will receive me entirely without formality and exactly as if I were already what I wish to become—a dear friend. Zita von Strellwitz.'"

"That is the prize-package of the lot, isn't it?" said Patsy.

"I just know that she is lovely," replied his wife. "Nick has said so much about her. I know I shall fall in love with Countess Zita forthwith."

"Sure. I think I will, too."

"Let me catch you," said Adelina; and they both laughed. "Now go outside and send those automatons away, Patsy. There's a good fellow."

Patsy repaired to the adjoining room, where, as Adelina had prophesied, he found the four messengers standing at attention exactly as he had left them, and they saluted solemnly as he approached.

"Gentlemen," said Patsy, "will you convey to his majesty, the king, the deep sense of obligation I am under by being so graciously received; and to his royal highness, Prince Rupert, my profound gratitude for the sentiments expressed in his letter; and to her royal highness Deehra, on behalf of Madam Garvan, her great pleasure at being the recipient of such a kind and gracious note; and to Countess Von Strellwitz please say that Madam Garvan and I both hope that the hour she mentions will be a short one."

The four messengers bowed their heads solemnly, saluted, wheeled in their tracks, and marched majestically through the doorway; and Patsy, turning a laughing face toward his wife as she came into the room, sang a refrain from Sullivan's great song:

"'Is it a dream? Then waking would be pain;
Oh, do not wake me, let me dream again.'"

"Patsy," said his wife, with a troubled countenance, "do you realize that such great personages as we have suddenly become should not be traveling without a maid and a valet? And we have neither. I wonder what these great people will think of us, being unattended as we are?"

"Now, look here, Adelina, we agreed between us

when we started out that we would do without your maid because we wished to be alone together. And I never did have a valet yet, and I'm not going to begin now. I don't care a picayune what they think of us. I don't want a man standing around waiting to put my socks on for me, and to tie my four-in-hand—and I can button your waists in the back just as good as any maid who ever served a princess. We will live just as naturally here in Breslin as if we were at home in Little Old New York, and if there are those who don't like it, there is always the railway to take us out of town."

A summons came at the door at that moment, and another officer in gorgeous uniform entered the room.

At first he saluted rather stiffly, but then he smiled and bowed and he said, while he extended his hand to Patsy:

"I do not believe that you desire a lot of stiff formality, Mr. Garvan. I am Colonel Hensau, and I love your friend Mr. Carter almost as well as you do, I think. I am sure that he has told you about me."

"Indeed he has, colonel," exclaimed Patsy, wringing Hensau's hand eagerly. "I am delighted to see you, and so is my wife. Neither of us require an introduction to you."

"The king has assigned me to take care of you during your stay here," Hensau continued. "I am quartered in the rooms adjoining these. I need only say——"

"You needn't say a word, old chap. I only regret that there isn't a Madam Hensau, who might be with us, also."

The colonel blushed a little; then he said:

"There is not a Madam Hensau just at present, but possibly you have heard Mr. Carter say that Countess Zita has consented to wear that title after a little time? Yes? She is coming here to see you as soon——"

"She is here now," said a laughing voice behind them, and the countess came into the room without announcement, since the door was wide open and there was nothing to prevent her from doing so.

She went straight across it to Adelina and threw her arms impulsively around her.

"I feel as if I had known you always," exclaimed the countess. "I have heard so much about you. You must call me Zita, and I shall call you Adelina whether you wish me to do so or not. You know—perhaps Mr. Carter has told you—I am almost a law unto myself, in Breslin. Even the king says that he despairs of me, for I am constantly forgetting the formalities of palace life and doing something terrible. Only last week I called out before a room full of people and in the presence of his majesty, too—I actually shouted out to the prince, 'Rupert, come here! I want you!' The king looked terribly shocked, and everybody else, even the prince, laughed. I saw the king's lips twitching, too, although he frowned like a thunder-cloud."

"What did the prince do?" asked Adelina.

"He came directly, of course, like the splendid fellow he is. 'All right, Zita,' he replied. 'What do you want?' But I was too confused for a moment to speak. Mr. Garvan, I hope——"

She stopped in astonishment, for Patsy was looking about him in apparent eagerness, under the table and behind the chairs; and, after a moment, Zita added:

"May I ask what in the world you are looking for, sir?"

"I was looking for *Mister* Garvan. I thought he went out when Fritz Hensau and Zita von Strellwitz entered," Patsy replied.

They all laughed together, then, and Zita exclaimed:

"Join hands, then. It is a bargain. We'll all be old friends, just as if we had been children together. We will be Fritz and Patrick, and——"

"No; Patsy. Say Patsy."

"All right. Patsee—is that right?"

"It will pass muster."

"Very well. Patsee and Fritz and Adelina and Zita."

Then Adelina led Zita away into another room and left the men to themselves, and they soon lighted cigars and made themselves comfortable.

"We are bidden to the palace for an audience with the king, at ten in the morning," said Patsy presently. "It is up to you, old chap, to instruct us how to proceed about that matter. I am afraid I am rather too democratic for palace usages, and I'll make some break or other, as sure as you're born."

"If I were you," replied Fritz, "I would not ask for instructions, nor would I act upon them if I received any. The king expects you to conduct yourself in a perfectly natural manner, and he will think all the more of you if you do so. Of course, one never interrupts his majesty when he is speaking, and one also waits always to let him speak first. Those are really all the rules you need observe."

It was some time after that when Patsy said suddenly:

"I have always been anxious to come here to make the acquaintance of the people my chief learned to love so well. Nick has told me all about his experiences

here many times, but I have had a desire to see and know you all. By the way, is that Count Herbert von Linmark, the one whom Nick wounded so badly in the horseback-duel, alive yet?"*

"Alive? Yes, indeed. He is very much alive. Just at present he is a very great menace to us all, as well. Even the king is worried about matters in Cretonia, as his estates are called. You know he is all-powerful there. Just at present he is defying the king himself, almost."

"Will you tell me about it?" asked Patsy.

"Certainly," was the instant reply.

CHAPTER III.

A PLOT AGAINST AN EMPIRE.

"I don't know how much or how little Nick Carter has ever told you about that same Count Herbert," said Fritz, "but I will tell the story in my own way, if you don't mind, Patsy."

"I would greatly prefer that you would do so," was the reply.

"Well, to begin right, there were years when Count Herbert looked very high indeed for a matrimonial alliance. He is the inheritor of the immense estates of Cretonia, and, although his rank is only that of a count, in Cretonia, among his own people, he is reckoned a king; or, at least, the equal of a king. He rules over his subjects with as much or more absolute authority than the king exercises here in Breslin. He is fabulously rich, greatly powerful, and he believed he was justified in demanding the hand of Princess Deehra in marriage."

"Indeed."

"That was many years ago, when Deehra was a child."

"Yes."

"The king would have none of it, and he told the count so. Then Zita came to the palace as lady in waiting upon her royal highness, the princess, and Count Herbert speedily fell in love with her."

"Well, you couldn't blame him for doing that."

"No; if he had been a gentleman about it. But all the while he was telling Zita that he loved her, he was also plotting to marry the princess. But Carter has told you all about that part of it; how the princess had fallen in love with the American officer, who is now Count Von Hartzwold; how the princess ran away to elope with him, and how Count Herbert of Linmark took advantage of her flight to abduct her, thinking that he would force her to marry him, and afterward force the king to recognize him—and all that?"

"Yes."

"Well, Linmark was in love with Zita all the while—and now, to bring the matter up to date and tell you exactly what the situation is at the present moment, Linmark has retired to Cretonia, he has organized his people upon a war footing, and he has sent a formal message to the king in which he demands the hand of Countess Zita in marriage, as the price of his loyalty to the crown. That is the whole thing in a nutshell."

"That sounds as though he means business, Fritz."

"He does mean business. There is no doubt of that."

"What sort of a man is Linmark? What is your personal estimation of him, Fritz?"

"You must know, of course, that I dislike him to the point of hatred, Patsy," was the slow reply."

"Yes; I suppose as much. But that does not prevent you from giving a fair opinion of the man, does it?"

"No."

"Then give me yours."

"Linmark is just a handsome daredevil, with wealth, and power, and a following that any country need not despise. He is as big and strong as he is handsome; he is a master at arms with any weapon you might place in his hand; he is brave to recklessness; he isn't afraid of God, man, or the devil——"

"Therein lies his weakness, perhaps. If he had a little of the fear of God in his heart, he would be the stronger for it, don't you think?"

"Yes."

"Go on, please."

"He is the sort of chap that would not hesitate to defy the king himself, as his message to his majesty proves, and it is also true that among the mountains of Cretonia, and in his Castle of Linmark, which is almost inaccessible and, therefore, practically impregnable, he could almost defy the armies of Europe."

"Just what does he threaten to do, in that letter to the king, in case his demands are not met?" asked Patsy.

"In a word, to deny the authority of the king, over him; to forswear his allegiance to his majesty; to set up a kingdom of his own, in Cretonia; to announce his

*See No. 590, NICK CARTER WEEKLY.

independence and to send out ambassadors to all the courts of Europe, and of the world. He will proclaim himself Herbert I., King of Cretonia."

"Just what effect would such an act have upon this kingdom, Fritz?"

"It would be a severe blow; it might bring about endless trouble; it might, and doubtless would if it were permitted to stand, result in the dismemberment of the kingdom, for there are other powerful nobles who might follow his lead, joining either with Cretonia, or setting up independent governments for themselves."

"How would the Powers regard such a proceeding."

"The Powers would look upon it publicly with horror; privately with unmixed joy. England would raise its arms and mutter 'By Jove, dontcherknow!' and immediately start a war in Afghanistan or somewhere else, to engage all John Bull's attention. France would shrug her shoulders and smile, and wait; Germany would deliberately turn its back; Russia wouldn't bother at all unless during the dismemberment the Bear could grab a slice of territory."

"So it is really a serious situation, eh?"

"Most serious."

"And it makes Zita, and, because of her, you also, the bone of contention."

"Yes. It makes her the sacrifice, and me the pawn that must be moved out of the way."

"What does Zita say about it all?"

"That she will take her own life before she will consent to become the wife of Count Herbert."

"What do you say about it?"

"I haven't been saying a word—as yet."

"What do you feel inclined to say, Fritz?"

"My conduct, when it comes to the test, will be confined to deeds rather than to words."

"You mean——"

"I mean that I think I could find a way to kill Linmark before he could make Zita his wife."

"And now, what says the king?"

"His majesty has been very silent. I am his favorite at the palace. He loves Zita almost as dearly as he does his own daughter Deehra; and again, his pride stands in the way of giving his consent to a request that has taken the form of a demand. But——"

"Well?"

"He knows the power of Count Herbert."

"You mean by that, I suppose, that in the end the king will give his consent, and that Zita will be sacrificed?"

"I can see no other outcome of the affair. If I were the king and had to face the condition, I could see no other way out of the difficulty. His majesty's duty to his country, his duty to the crown he wears and to posterity, demands that he shall agree to the proposals of Count Herbert of Linmark."

"So you believe that is what will be done in the end?"

"Yes; unless you can suggest some way out of the trouble."

"I? Unless *I* can do that?"

"Yes."

"My dear fellow, how in the world can I do such a thing?"

"I don't know. The king believes you can do it."

"The—*king believes that I can do it?*"

"Yes."

"You are talking riddles, now."

"His majesty has said as much to me. Shall I tell you exactly what he did say?"

"Yes."

"He told me three days ago of your expected arrival; he spoke of letters he had received from Nick Carter, asking him to receive you graciously on his behalf. It all happened the very day when he received the peremptory demand from Linmark; and his majesty said to me:

" 'Colonel Hensau, we have received this day a communication from Cretonia, where Count Herbert proposes setting up a kingdom of his own and defying us here, unless we agree to certain proposals he makes. He demands the hand of Zita in marriage, and that you, colonel, be sent away out of the country for five years, which means that if I accept I must either assign you to a foreign court and keep you there for five years, or banish you entirely.

" 'Now,' he continued, after saying that as preliminary, 'I had already determined to send a cable-message to America, to Mr. Carter, requesting his immediate presence here, as my adviser, for he has a way of getting people out of difficult situations, that no one else I have ever known can equal.'

" 'That is true, your majesty,' I replied. 'Why not send for him?'

" 'Because it would be impossible for him to come. He says in the two letters I have just received from him that he was, when he wrote them, on the point of starting for Japan, on a special mission for his government, which will keep him absent from his home for many months.'

"'It is too bad,' I remarked; and his majesty replied:

"'Possibly not so unfortunate as it may appear at first thought. One of Mr. Carter's assistants—a Mr. Patrick Garvan—will arrive here in three days. I have heard Carter refer to him and praise him in the highest terms, and it has occurred to me that it may be that he can fill the place of his master, in part at least. At all events I have determined to send for him as soon as he arrives, and ask him, in the absence of Nicholas Carter, to advise with me.' Now, Patsy, you've got it straight."

Patsy was silent.

He had never dreamed of such a thing as this happening.

To have a powerful king over a great nation appeal to him for advice seemed unbelievable. He was too greatly amazed at first to say a word, but Hensau, watching him, saw his jaws shut tightly together, and gained courage thereby.

"What will you say to the king when he asks you the question, Patsy?" he asked.

"I shall advise him—I think—to lick the spots off of Count Herbert," was the quiet but emphatic reply.

"Good for you! You will stand our friend, won't you?"

"Well, Fritz, even leaving you out of the question—even without considering Zita at all in the matter—it isn't in my blood to knuckle under to any such proposition as Linmark makes. I will always consider the proposition of a man who *asks* a favor; but when a chap *demands* one, I am rather apt to hit him straight between the eyes. If I were the king of this country, I'd see it torn from end to end, and every stone turned over and rolled, before I'd consent to any such demand as that one."

"And you will tell his majesty that?"

"I surely will."

"Heaven bless you, Patsy."

"I'm not even thinking of you in this matter, Fritz; I'm thinking of the king himself."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I don't know much about the politics of Europe, and I don't want to; but it strikes me that if your king should knuckle under to Count Herbert in this matter, his power would be taken from him a mighty sight quicker than it could be lost in any other way. He would become the laughing-stock of Europe. Every court would know that Linmark had forced him into the position, and after that he would insist upon being made Chancellor, and he would be, in effect, the king. The king would become a mere figurehead."

CHAPTER IV.

THE ONLY ALTERNATIVE.

Hensau leaned forward in his chair, his face flushed with pleasure, and he said:

"And you will say all that to the king?"

"I will if he asks for my opinion," replied Patsy.

"He will surely ask for it; and at once."

"Tell me this, Fritz."

"Well?"

"When must Linmark have an answer to his demand?"

"There are seven days left before the reply must be sent to him. The time was fixed at ten days."

"Does Zita know all about it?"

"Certainly."

"Has the king talked with her about it?"

"She went to his majesty at once, as soon as I told her about it, but the king refused to discuss it with her. He told her, however, that nothing should be decided upon until she had been given an opportunity to be heard; and he added, in speaking to her:

"'It may become necessary, Zita, for you to sacrifice yourself for the good of your country. If the necessity should arise, I shall expect you to meet it with the same loyal heart that your father always gave me.'"

"Why don't you and Zita run away and be married at once? That would put an end——"

"Such a thing is out of the question. We cannot wed without the consent of the king, and—if I were left alone to decide the question, I should do one of two things."

"What are they?"

"I should either kill Linmark, or I should give my consent to the marriage; for only by adopting one course or the other could I save my country from the consequence of the threats Count Herbert makes."

"Then, as I look at it, there are only *three* things in sight, Fritz."

"What are those?"

"Well, you must let him have Zita; or you must murder him; or he and his Cretonians must be driven out of their mountains and made to sue for peace on their knees."

"You are right, Patsy; still, I should tell you now

of the utter uselessness of going to the extent of declaring war against the Cretonians."

"Why?"

"To be plain with you, we couldn't whip them."

"Do you mean that they would whip your soldiers?"

"No; I mean what I said; that we could not whip them."

"You will have to be a little more explicit."

"What I mean to say is that if our army were three or even four times the size it is, we could never hope to drive the Cretonians out of their mountains. They could pick our men off by the score and by the hundreds, without losing a man; they could blow us up with explosives, without themselves running into danger at all. They could defy us, and laugh at us, and in the end we would have to withdraw, and permit them to declare their independence."

Patsy was silent.

"And that is not all, either," said Fritz.

"What more, then?"

"At least two other countries of Europe would give them secret encouragement, and secret assistance as well. Any such move on our part would end in dire disaster."

"Suppose the Cretonians should come down out of their mountains and attack you?"

"Oh, that would be another matter entirely."

"Just what do you mean by that?"

"I mean that they would stand no show at all. If they should leave their mountains to fight with us they would never see them again."

"But you cannot go there after them, with any hope of success?"

"No."

"Then—hold on a minute. Here is another question."

"Well?"

"Suppose Count Herbert were out of the way, who would succeed him?"

"He is the last of his family, save some distant cousins. That is one reason why he is so anxious to marry."

"I asked you who would succeed him?"

"One of those cousins, I suppose."

"Would the successor be as dangerous a man, and as powerful, as the count? And would that successor be likely to keep up the feud?"

"No, to both. Of course not."

"Then it strikes me, Fritz, that there is only one thing to be done."

"Yes? What is it?"

"Why, somebody must go to Cretonia and capture or kill Count Herbert. He must either be left there in the mountains dead; or he must be brought away from those mountains, a prisoner of the king."

"That sounds easy, Patsy, the way you say it; but who is going to do it? Will you tell me that?"

"It looks to me, Fritz, as if it was up to you, as we would say in New York."

"I won't deny that I have thought of it," replied Fritz moodily, "but it seems so utterly impossible."

"Nothing is impossible where there is the right kind of determination back of desire."

"If the king will grant me permission to make the attempt, will you help me, Patsy?"

"Personally I would jump at the chance; but in the present case you will have to make your appeal to Madam Garvan," was the reply, delivered with a kindly smile.

"Eh? How is that?"

"When we came away from New York I gave my wife a solemn promise that until we returned there I would keep myself entirely out of adventure of any sort. Unless she will release me from that promise, my hands are tied."

"If I ask her to let you go to Cretonia with me, she will know at once that your life will be in constant danger from the moment you start away from here."

"Naturally."

"I am afraid she would refuse."

"Doubtless she would—if *you* asked her."

"Eh? What's that?"

"You must get Zita to make the request."

"Shake hands, Patsy! You *want* to go with me, don't you?"

"Well, I should say! Rather!"

"I wonder what those two are talking about in the other room, anyway? I have a good notion to call Zita out here and ask her now to——"

"I wouldn't."

"Why?"

"Because if I were a betting man I would give you big odds that Zita has been telling Adelina the same story that you have told me, and has already enlisted her sympathies. Anyhow, we'll wait till they come out."

"Just as you say."

"I wish, Fritz, that I had known something about this business before we came to Breslin."

"You do! Why?"

"Because I should greatly have preferred to come

into the city quietly, and not let it be known that I was here. As it stands, the whole country knows that I am a guest of the king, and that I am sent here by Nick Carter. Doubtless there are many who believe that it is Nick himself who is here. The news will get to Linmark, and he has had enough experience with my chief so that he knows what to expect, if one of us is sent out on his trail."

"It does handicap us somewhat. I see it now."

"If I could have entered the city unknown, then——"

He paused, for at that instant the door between the rooms opened and Adelina and Zita came toward them with their arms around each other, and with every evidence about them of sincere companionship and thorough understanding.

"What have you two been talking about?" asked Zita, addressing Patsy.

"The same subject that you two have been discussing," he replied, without hesitation.

"May we inquire if you have been listening at the door?" she demanded, with a smile.

"It was not necessary, Zita, for I know what subject is uppermost in your mind."

"Isn't it a shame?" exclaimed Adelina. "Zita has told me all about it."

"Well," said Patsy, "have you arrived at any solution of the problem?"

"There can be only one, Patsy."

"Good. Tell me what you have determined that one to be."

"Count Herbert of Linmark must be made to see the error of his ways."

"Correct. That is a very pleasant manner of putting it. Pray, who is to show him the error of his ways? and how is it to be done?"

"We don't know yet how it is to be done, or who is to do it. We came out here to talk the matter over with you."

"We have decided," said Fritz, "that Count Herbert must be taken prisoner somehow, and so brought out of Cretonia. Either that, or——"

"Or he must be killed," said Zita calmly.

"And Patsy says it is up to me to do one thing or the other," continued Fritz.

Adelina nodded her head emphatically.

"You and Patsy must do it together," she said decidedly.

Fritz leaped to his feet.

"Would you give your consent that he shall aid me?" he asked of Adelina, holding out both hands.

"I should think that he had changed dreadfully since I married him, if he declined to do so," she replied.

"But he assured me that he would have to obtain your consent first. He made you a promise of some sort before you came here, and now——"

"I relieve him from it. Heavens! Do you suppose that that man can be permitted to carry Zita off to the mountains, like an ogre in a fairy-story, where no doubt he would eat her before he had done with her? But—there is one condition tacked onto that release from Patsy's given word."

"Indeed? What is it?"

"If you two go into that country on any such errand, you must take us with you."

"We must—what?"

"You must take us with you. That's what."

"My dear Madam Garvan——"

"Adelina, if you please, sir."

"But such a thing as you say is utterly impossible. It is not to be thought of. It is——"

"Nonsense! I see that Zita and I have plotted a great deal farther than you have. We have laid out the entire campaign. We know exactly how it must be done, in order to succeed. I suppose you, Fritz, would be for taking half a dozen picked men with you—perhaps more than that—and going straight into the heart of Cretonia at once, trusting to luck for an opportunity to capture or kill the man who rules there. I don't mean that you would deliberately murder him, but that is in effect what you have in your mind. I know it. Now, you just wait a moment and hear our plans."

CHAPTER V.

ADELINA FURNISHES A SURPRISE.

"I will admit that I have had some such idea in mind, as you suggest," said Fritz.

"It would be no good; no good at all; believe me. You would be captured before you had gone halfway to Castle Linmark. I am sure of it."

"There would be that possibility, of course."

"And the men you would take with you would be a hindrance instead of a help."

"Possibly. I had not thought the matter very thoroughly, as yet."

"We have."

"Get busy," said Patsy. "Let us hear what you have to propose."

She looked at her husband smilingly for a moment; then she replied:

"I hope, Patrick, that you have not forgotten the fact that I sing quiet well, have you?"

"What in the world are you driving at, Adelina?"

"I will tell you presently. Also, that I use the tambourine quite expertly, and the clappers or bones—castanets, too—just as well?"

"I haven't forgotten. Go on. I'm beginning to catch on; but Fritz is not."

"I have made a discovery since Zita and I have been talking together, and that is that she is just as apt, or possibly more so, at such things, as I am."

"Well?"

"Well! Fritz shall shave off his mustache and stain his skin quite dark. He must also dye his hair with some preparation that won't wash off; and Patsy, you and Zita will have to perform the same operations on yourselves. Fortunately I am sufficiently dark already, and I look like a gipsy, anyhow."

"Oho! It is gipsy business, is it?"

"Yes. We will be strolling Spanish gipsies, all of us, in color of skin, hair, musical instruments, everything that goes with the parts."

"Fritz's eyes are a bright blue."

"I have thought of that. In disguising him we will, of course, make his skin as dark as our own, but we will give to his hair, when we dye it, a decided red tinge. I have seen gipsies who had that sort of hair."

"Yes. Well?"

"That will account for his blue eyes."

"I think so. What else?"

"Zita tells me that it is not an unusual thing for bands of gipsies to wander through Cretonia at this time of year. She even says that we are more than likely to encounter some of them."

"We are sure to do so," commented Fritz, who was scowling, as if he did not like the idea at all.

"If we should do that," continued Adelina, "Patsy speaks the Romany language perfectly. Zita and I both speak Spanish, as does Patsy; and you—well, you must take your chances, that is all about it."

"What more?" asked Patsy, who had thus far offered no comment regarding the plan.

"As a wandering quartet of gipsies, we will not be suspected. We can discover all that is taking place in Cretonia; we will play upon our musical instruments; Zita and I will sing for the people there; we will dance for them; I can do the bolero and many Mexican dances and Chilian dances which will be utterly strange to them there. Patsy sings a fine baritone, and Fritz looks as if he had a good tenor voice; I will tell fortunes—and there you are, my friends."

Fritz shook his head, but it was Patsy who spoke.

"You haven't finished yet, Adelina," he said.

"No."

"Tell us the entire play, as you have laid it out."

"Why, our objective point will be Castle Linmark, of course. When once we get to it, and have worked our way into it, and, perhaps, to the presence of its master, circumstances must determine what will be done next."

"I suppose you have a vague idea that we can kidnap the count and carry him away bodily, haven't you?" he asked.

"Something of that sort; yes."

"Have you thought about the risks that *you* would run? I refer to both of you."

"A little. Not much."

"Don't you know that once inside the castle, we would all be entirely in the power of the man who rules it?"

"Yes."

"And that even if he should not recognize Zita through her disguise, as he would be very likely to do——"

"We have thought of that. We are sure that won't happen."

"Well, even if he should not recognize her, there is always the possibility that he might fall temporarily in love with one or both of you, and then—what then?"

"You would have to protect us, that's all."

"That might prove to be rather a large contract."

"Are you afraid to assume it?"

"For your sakes it looks a little large, Adelina. You are both women of unusual beauty—I'm not throwing bouquets; I'm taking stock."

"Well?"

"I happen to know how beautiful *you* are, Adelina, in the gipsy costume; and I have no doubt that Zita will be quite as bewitching. You would both be playing with fire."

"Then, as you would put it, it will be up to our husbands to protect us."

"Up to—our—*what?*" It was Fritz who asked the question.

"I said 'up to our husbands,'" replied Adelina quietly, but firmly. "You haven't heard all the plan, yet."

"Is there a wedding goes with this package?" asked

Patsy; and he laughed aloud when he saw the flush that flew into the face of Zita.

"There is," returned Adelina. "Zita and Fritz must be quietly and privately married before we start. And then——"

"But that would be treason—almost," objected Fritz. "We cannot marry without the consent of the king."

"Then the king must be induced to give his consent; and to give the bride away."

"But—good Heavens!—his majesty will never do that?"

"I think he will," insisted Adelina quietly. "I have never seen your king, of course. I know nothing about him, and I suppose that kings, as kings, are rather hard to handle. All the same, I believe I can induce him to give his consent to my plan, and I'm going to try."

"But how? How?" demanded Fritz. "If the information should get to Linmark——"

"It won't get to Linmark. Nobody will know about it save ourselves, the king, and possibly Prince Rupert."

"I think, Adelina," said Patsy, "that you had better enlighten us concerning the arguments you mean to use to convince his majesty of the wisdom of such a proceeding."

"Gladly. As I understand the situation at present, the king is rather between the devil and the deep sea, isn't he?"

"That about expresses the position, I think."

"On the one hand, he must bestow the hand of Zita, whom he loves almost as a daughter, upon a man she hates and loathes—upon a man whom he himself hates almost as much as she does. Not only that, he must give in to the demands of Linmark, thereby confessing to the world that he is afraid—*afraid*. And not only these, but he must look forward to the time when he becomes himself a mere figurehead in this country, and Count Herbert rules it as Bismarck once ruled Germany. A king without a scepter, and a usurper on the throne as acting king. That is one phase of the situation."

"Yes."

"On the other hand is the withdrawal from the kingdom, of Cretonia, and the king powerless to prevent it; powerless to whip the Cretonians into subjugation, and, therefore, the gradual dismemberment of the kingdom."

"I declare, Adelina, you are quite a politician."

"Well, the argument that I will employ with his majesty will be simply this: I will tell him that if he consents to our plan we will save his kingdom for him, we will save Zita and Fritz, and we will save his own self-respect. We will bring Count Herbert a prisoner into Breslin, where the king can make his own terms and the outside world will never know that this country has lived through a crisis."

"You make it sound very plausible, Adelina," said Patsy. "If it were not for——"

"For the risks that Zita and I will run?" she interrupted him.

"Yes. That is what I was about to say."

"We are willing to take those chances. We must take them. We would be in no personal danger, save from the count himself, we think; and both of us will be prepared to protect ourselves from him."

"But——"

"And, besides, it will be one of our rules never to become separated. We four must remain together under all circumstances."

"Count Herbert is a despot in his own country, and is absolute in his own castle," said Fritz.

"What of that?"

"Suppose a case; suppose we four were there now; suppose that you and Zita danced and sang before the count; suppose that he was attracted to one of you or to both of you? Suppose he ordered Patsy and I seized and bound, and otherwise made helpless—he might even direct that we be killed, or thrown into a dungeon; you two would be utterly helpless, and entirely in his power."

"As I have already said, our husbands must guard us against any such situation."

"Our husbands," Fritz repeated after her again. "I have no idea that the king would ever be brought to consent to that."

"He must be. He will be. It is a necessary part of the plan."

"You will find it impossible."

Adelina gazed at Fritz a moment through half-closed lids, and then she asked:

"Is your king a coward? or is he a brave man?"

"He is a brave man; the bravest of the brave, madam."

"Then he will consent to the plan I will propose to him. If he is a coward he will refuse."

"I do not see the application."

"If he is a coward he will either give Zita up to Count Herbert, or he will refuse to do so and still permit the Cretonians to withdraw from the kingdom. If he is a brave man he will do neither. If he is a

brave man he will do as I suggest, and stake his all if necessary, upon the success of the plan. If Count Herbert should succeed in this demand, it would be like blackmail; it would not be the last that Linmark would make; you may be sure of that, sir."

"I think you are right."

"We are to go to the palace at ten to-morrow, I understand. I wish you, Fritz, to arrange so that I may have a private audience with the king. Do you think you can do it?"

"Yes. I am sure of it."

CHAPTER VI.

AN AUDIENCE WITH THE KING.

The two young women were left alone together after that, for Patsy went out into the city with Colonel Hensau, and the balance of the afternoon was spent in going about town, visiting the barracks, watching a drill of one of the regiments of Dragoons, and in various other ways interesting to Patsy.

Both were silent regarding the subject that was uppermost in their minds; as if by mutual consent they avoided it.

Tacitly they had agreed to leave the outcome of the plan to Adelina and her interview with the king; but for all that Hensau was moody and distrait all the afternoon.

Back at the Hotel Gretz, however, in the gorgeous apartments furnished expressly for Patsy and his wife, Adelina and Zita were busily engaged in unpacking trunks—or, rather, in searching among the articles contained in them, for certain things that Adelina wished to find.

These were finally found and packed again in Patsy's Gladstone bag, and then a porter was summoned and told to have it conveyed to the apartments of the countess at the palace.

"It is a pity," said Adelina, "that we must wait till to-morrow to see the king. I would be for going to him at once and putting the matter before him."

"That would be fatal," said Zita. "He has set the time for receiving you, and you must go there at that time and no other."

"Do you suppose that I can induce him to consent to come to your rooms after I have talked with him, so that we can carry out the rest of my plan?" asked Adelina.

"I think so. It will depend largely upon the mood he is in; but that is likely to be a good one, since he is looking forward to the interview with your husband."

"He will be more anxious to see me after I have told him what I wish to do."

"I think so, too."

"Shall we take Prince Rupert into our confidence, Zita?"

"Oh, yes. We must; only I am sure that he will not approve."

"Well, if he doesn't object, I sha'n't mind."

"He will regard it as a foolhardy enterprise, and particularly so for you and me."

"Well, I suppose, judged from one standpoint, it is so. But from another—and I think it is the most reasonable one—it is the only really practical method by which the king can win. The king! Bah, Zita; I don't care a fig about whether the king wins or loses, so long as we get you out of this terrible mess. And once you are married to Fritz——"

"We must fulfil the rest of our contract, Adelina."

"Certainly. I had not thought of not doing so."

Notwithstanding her natural self-possession, Adelina was in a flutter of excitement, when she and Patsy were ready to start for the palace soon after nine-thirty the following morning.

Until that moment she had thought that all would be easy sailing, and that she would only have to prefer her request to the king to have him see the logic of it at once, and grasp at it as a drowning man seizes at a straw.

But now, as the moment for the presentation drew near, she confessed to herself that it did not look so easy.

It was rather a formidable thing to be presented to a king; it was a more formidable one to request a private interview with him at that first meeting; and it was still more formidable to suggest such a thing, as she was contemplating, to him.

Patsy had not discussed the subject with her since the talk of the preceding day; but now, as they entered the carriage and were driven away, he said to her:

"I suppose you have got your story well rehearsed, sweetheart; eh?"

"What story? What are you talking about?" she demanded.

"Why, the story you are going to tell the king."

"How do you know that I am going to tell him any story at all?"

"Have you forgotten that you asked Fritz yesterday to secure you a private audience with his majesty?

And don't I know my little wife? And—— I'd bet a cooky right now that you have got something up your sleeve that you are going to spring on his majesty, and which you are dead sure will win out for you."

"Perhaps I have. Maybe you are not very far wrong about that, Don Patricio."

"Aren't you going to let me in on it, girl?"

"I don't know. I haven't decided."

"At least, tell me about it."

"No; that is just the one thing I won't do."

"Eh? Why not?"

"I'm not sure that you would approve, and I'm not going to give you a chance to disapprove."

"That doesn't sound very encouraging. I hope you won't attempt anything foolish, Adelina?"

"Did I ever do that, Patsy?"

"Oh, I don't know. You married me, and there are lots of people who would have told you that that was a foolish thing to do."

"Tell me, Patsy, do you suppose the king is very hard to get along with?"

"No, I don't. At least, he won't be for you."

"Why not for me, pray?"

"Because you can bewitch anybody and everybody you come in contact with. Your beauty——"

"There, that will be about enough from you at the present moment, Mr. Garvan. I like to have people think I'm nice, of course, but—I'm not half as good-looking as Zita."

"Gee! Where are your eyes? Zita is beautiful, I admit; and charming, too. But when it comes to comparing her with *you*——"

"Patsy, dear, will you always be as loyal as that?" she interrupted him.

"Will I! Look, there is the palace. I wonder what we have to do when we get there? Do we send in our cards, do you suppose, and say to the flunky, 'By appointment'?"

But Colonel Hensau received them when the carriage came to a stop, and personally conducted them inside the palace.

"Will the king see me for a few moments alone?" Adelina asked him.

"Yes; though he seemed greatly surprised at the request. He asked me what it was about."

"What did you tell him?"

"I suggested that it might be a message from Mr. Carter; and he grasped at that idea, although I think he wondered why such a message was not sent by Patsy. His majesty has made one great concession in the case of you two."

"What is that?" asked Patsy.

"He has directed that you be presented to him informally. You will find, when you enter his cabinet, only the king and queen, Prince Rupert and his two sons, Princess Deehra and her husband, whom you already know, and Zita."

"Who is to present us?"

"I have been given that great honor."

"Bully!"

"You see, Patsy, if the presentation had been a formal one, you would have had to attend in court dress, your ambassador would have had to present you, and there would have been a lot of fuss and feathers about it which I am sure you would not have liked."

"Not a little bit."

"As it is, all that is dispensed with."

"Tell me how the thing is to be done, anyhow."

"At an informal presentation, such as this one, they will all rise as you enter the cabinet. I will lead you to the king, and I will say: 'Your majesty, permit me to present Mr. Patrick Garvan and Madam Garvan, of the United States of America.' Then I will take a step backward, and wait a moment."

"What are we expected to do then?"

"Simply bow, in acknowledgment of the introduction, but remain silent until the king has spoken. After that you will not need to be told what to do. His majesty will introduce you to the others; first to the queen, then to the princess, then to the prince, and so on."

And after the manner outlined already the presentation took place.

The king received them both very graciously, stepping forward at once and taking them both by the hands, and continuing to hold them so for several moments, while he expressed his pleasure at receiving them.

"We are under great and lasting obligation to Mr. Carter, whom you serve, Mr. Garvan," he said finally, "and we receive you in the same spirit we would extend to him."

Then the other presentations were made, and, somehow, all stiffness and formality were forgotten, and both Patsy and Adelina were made to feel entirely at ease at once.

The queen was most gracious; the princess was enthusiastically jolly, and quite unlike Patsy's idea of what a princess should be; the prince clapped him

on the shoulder in his own hearty way, and asked at once: "How did you leave my friend Nicholas? Well, I hope?"

Presently, happening to look around, Patsy discovered that the king and Adelina had withdrawn to a far corner of the room, where they were removed from the hearing of the others, and there they were seated together, side by side, as informally as if they were merely old friends who had met again after a term of separation.

He could see that Adelina was bending forward, with flushed cheeks and flashing eyes, and was talking in her animated way, and that the king was listening to her with a smile, and with the air of one who was entirely charmed.

Prince Rupert noticed the scene at the same time, and he smiled and said:

"Madam Garvan seems to have made a conquest already. Indeed, she has made as many, I believe, as there are persons in this cabinet. She is altogether charming."

"Yes," admitted Patsy, "I think so."

The prince smiled again, and added:

"Your wife is the most beautiful woman I ever saw, I think."

"So do I, your highness."

This time the prince laughed, and Patsy joined with him. Then he nodded in the direction of the pair, and said:

"That, prince, is the commencement of a conspiracy."

"So soon?"

"Yes."

"Evidently you are in the secret."

"No; only partly. But it is the beginning of a conspiracy by which Countess Zita is to be saved from Count Herbert of Linmark, and also Cretonia is to be prevented from revolting."

The prince looked grave at once.

"I did not know that you had been told about it," he said. "I did not know that his majesty intended to discuss the matter with you; but—— How comes it that Madam Garvan is the chief conspirator?"

"That is a secret in which I have not been fully informed as yet. I believe, however, that you are to be made a party to it. It was hatched yesterday, between the countess and my wife. The king looks as if he liked it, doesn't he?"

"She certainly is winning him, whatever it is."

"Prince, she would win a stone image if she set out to do it. She'd make an Egyptian mummy sit up and take notice."

"They are rising. They are coming this way, Mr. Garvan."

"Yes; and the king is nodding and half-laughing. She has won!"

"I wonder what it is all about?" murmured the prince.

"I expect we'll know presently," replied Patsy.

CHAPTER VII.

ADELINA SPRINGS HER SURPRISE.

Patsy and his wife were entertained at luncheon in the palace.

When the king finally rose from the table he announced:

"I have dismissed all thought of affairs of state for the balance of the day, although I can ill afford to do so. I desire the attendance of each of you gentlemen on a short ride with me, after which I believe there will be some sort of an entertainment arranged for us. We are, I believe, to go at three o'clock, to the blue parlor in the apartments of the princess, where something in the nature of a surprise will be in store for us."

And there was.

It was exactly three o'clock when the king, followed by the prince, Count von Hartzwold, and Patsy, arrived at the princess' door and were admitted. Colonel Hensau came a moment later.

When the gentlemen entered the parlor there was no one there to receive them; but after a moment the queen came in from another room, and she was laughing. She was followed presently by Deehra, who also seemed to be amused about something.

Of the gentlemen present, the king alone seemed to know what was expected.

After a moment Patsy leaned over and said to the prince:

"I'll bet a big red apple that I could guess what is coming."

"Then pray do not try, Mr. Garvan," said the king quickly, who had overheard the remark.

But there was no necessity for guessing, for at that moment the folding doors between the rooms were thrown open, and the surprise was before them.

The king clapped his hands enthusiastically. The prince stared, open-mouthed, and then looked from

the king to Patsy, and then back again to the scene before them. Fritz Hensau caught his breath, frowned—and then he so far forgot himself as to clap his hands and laugh also; but the king kindly took no notice of it.

There were two ravishingly beautiful gipsy girls framed in the wide doorway, one of whom was unmistakably Adelina; but the other——

Zita's most intimate friends could not have recognized her.

Her skin had been stained until it was a shade darker than Adelina's. Her hair was dyed black. Her eyebrows were made to look heavier than they really were, and were also of a coal-black hue. A gold band that glistened with gems was bound around her forehead and her hair. She wore a waist and jacket of scarlet velvet, trimmed with gold braid and ornamented with glass beads and jet. A visorless cap of black velvet, and with a diamond gleaming at the front of it, was set jauntily upon her hair, with a small white plume depending from it. A short red skirt, richly embroidered with gold braid, jet, and beads, extended half-way between her knees and the floor, and a pair of high, serviceable russet shoes encased her feet. In her right hand she carried a tambourine, while over her shoulder, held in place by a silken sash, was slung a mandolin of twelve strings—an instrument which she played exquisitely. She had been transformed under the magic touch of Adelina into a veritable gipsy, and there was not the least likelihood that any person who knew Zita von Strellwitz would ever suspect that this gipsy girl, who looked not a day more than sixteen, were the same.

There was no necessity for a disguise, so far as Adelina was concerned, and yet there was very little of her identity left to recognize.

She had stained her naturally dark skin somewhat deeper in hue, and her great round, black eyes seemed to have taken upon themselves an extra size.

Her costume, cut after the same pattern as the other, was colored like gold, while the trimmings were jet and white and red.

The band around her brow and hair was silver, and it gleamed and flashed with imitation rubies and emeralds. Her cap looked as if it had been fashioned out of a block of solid gold, save where a huge emerald—imitation, of course—gleamed at the front of it.

There was a tambourine pendent from her bodice; she carried castanets in her hands, and over her shoulder, fastened by a sash, hung a small guitar.

Then they began to sing and dance together, at first keeping time with the castanets and the tambourine in Zita's hands.

They took turns at this exercise, one stepping forward as soon as the other retreated, and vice versa.

Next Zita unslung her many-stringed mandolin, and played an accompaniment while Adelina sang a Spanish love-song.

Then, to the accompaniment of the guitar in Adelina's hands, Zita sang a Magyar trysting-song, and after a little they both came forward and sang together, dancing and playing on their instruments while they did so, the beautiful La Paloma of Mexico.

It was the end of the performance, but Adelina's rich contralto and Zita's mezzo-soprano had blended so perfectly that the listeners sat as if they were entranced after the song was finished.

Then, with graceful bound, the two ran forward and began passing their tambourines around among their little audience, as they intended to do the act when they should play their parts in earnest.

But the king and the prince chose to take this part of it in earnest, also, for they dropped rings and decorations into the tambourines, as did the queen and the princess.

"Grand!" exclaimed the king, rising. "It was the finest performance I ever saw. If you two do not save Cretonia to my kingdom, nothing else can."

"What is that?" demanded the queen; and then his majesty told her of the plan as it had been outlined to him, for, although she had been present while the girls were arranging their costumes, she had known nothing of the reasons for it that were behind it all.

Presently the king turned to Hensau, and said:

"Colonel Hensau, you will go at once to my cabinet, and conduct hither two gentlemen whom you will find waiting there. You will bring them by the back staircase, passing through the apartments of Prince Rupert to reach it, and thus avoiding observation. You will find the gentlemen masked and wearing cloaks which will conceal their costumes. Let there be no loss of time."

Those who were present with him in the room looked at his majesty in wonder, for they could not imagine what was to take place now.

Only Adelina seemed to know that, for, in obedience to a gesture of the king's, she approached him, and walked away toward a window with him, where they remained whispeing and laughing together until the outer door was thrown open and Hensau entered again, followed by the two personages the king had described.

But the moment they were inside the room they threw aside their masks and cloaks, and there stood revealed no less a person than his eminence the Cardinal, and also the father confessor of the queen.

The king stepped forward quickly, and led Fritz Hensau across the room to Zita, when he placed her hand in his.

"Zita, my child," he said, "do you love this man with all your heart, and will you become his bride here and now?"

"I do, your majesty, and I will," she replied in a tremulous voice.

"Fritz Hensau," said the king then, speaking sternly, "are you prepared to swear by your loyalty to me to be as loyal and true to her if I give her to you?"

"I swear it, your majesty."

"Cardinal, I direct you now to act upon the authority that has been given you, and to unite these two in wedlock."

Perhaps no stranger wedding-ceremony was ever solemnized than that one, where a king and a queen, a prince and a princess of the blood were present, and where a plain citizen of the United States and his wife were the conspicuous guests.

"So," murmured the prince, in Patsy's ear, "this was the conspiracy you foreshadowed, was it?"

"Partly; yes."

"Partly! Goodness, is there more to come?"

"A little."

"I confess I do not yet understand the meaning of the masquerade, or realize quite how it is that those two are expected to save Cretonia for us. I did not hear the explanation the king made to the queen."

"Listen, then. The king is about to explain it all, I think."

"My good friends," said the king, taking a step forward, where he could address them all at the same time, "I enjoin upon each one of you a vow of entire secrecy until such time as I shall give permission for you to speak. There is a delicate mission of statecraft upon which Colonel Hensau and his bride, accompanied by Mr. and Madam Garvan, will set forth during the morning of to-morrow. It was necessary that Colonel Hensau and the countess should be married before they started on this mission for me; hence the ceremony you have just witnessed. When they return from that business their marriage will be announced, Colonel Hensau will receive his commission as a general of division in my army, and he and his bride shall be given a leave of absence of two months for their honeymoon-trip. But in the meantime—silence!"

He stepped forward then, and kissed the bride tenderly, and then laughingly he turned to Hensau.

"I am afraid, Fritz, that you will have to be content with a gipsy for a bride, for the present. Madam Garvan assured me that this stain will not wash off, and cannot be removed without trouble and care and considerable time. Are you content?"

"I am the happiest man on earth, your majesty."

"Good; and so you should be. You are relieved from duty now. Make an appointment with Mr. Garvan, to meet him this evening to perfect your plans, and then take your bride away to some place where you can talk it all over. Mr. Garvan?"

"Yes, your majesty."

"I will ask you to go with me to my cabinet, if you please."

"With great pleasure, sir."

"And, Rupert, will you come with us?"

"Thank you, sire; yes."

"Can't Richard and I go, too, father?" asked Deehra poutingly. "Please."

"Yes. Come along if you wish."

"And the queen—my mother?"

"No, dear," said the queen. "I will not go with you. Mr. Garvan, it has given me great pleasure to know you and madam, your wife. She is so beautiful."

"Indeed, she is, your majesty."

The king gave his arm to Adelina, the princess took Patsy's arm, and, with Richard and the prince bringing up the rear, they went by the rear staircase and through the apartments of the prince, to the king's cabinet; and as they passed out at the door, the king remarked:

"This has been one of the most pleasurable days I have ever lived."

"I feel as though I were in a land of enchantment," Patsy said to the princess, as they walked along together.

"Indeed?" she asked. "How is that?"

"Well, for one thing, I never expected to have a real, live princess clinging to my arm just as though she liked it."

"And for another——"

"For another, I never expected to know a princess who—who——" Patsy floundered.

"Who was so altogether lovable; is that it?" she asked, laughing.

"You win," he said, laughing also. "You guessed it the first time."

CHAPTER VIII.

AT THE ENEMY'S GATE.

"That," said Fritz Hensau, pointing straight ahead of them toward a huge pile of masonry that looked from the distance at which they viewed it as if it were a part with the mountain, where it frowned down upon them, "is Castle Linmark."

"Goodness!" exclaimed Adelina. "It certainly looks forbidding enough, doesn't it? I suppose, Fritz, that what you call the really dangerous part of our expedition begins now."

"Yes. It does."

"And yet, if I remember correctly, before we left Breslin you assured Zita and me both of the constant and paralyzing danger with which we would be constantly menaced."

"Well, I believed what I said."

"And yet we have now been five days away from the palace, and we have been three days inside the borders of Cretonia, and we haven't seen a sign of danger of any kind."

"Possibly," replied Fritz, "you and Zita do not see the dangers that we do. If you and Zita were less beautiful——"

Zita, on the opposite side of him, tossed her head, and said:

"Really, one would suppose that we two are the only women worth looking at in all this part of the world. Do you two suppose that, because you happened to fall in love with us, and because you think we are the only bits of perfection that was ever created, all other men must hold to the same opinion?"

"How can we help supposing such a thing?" laughed Patsy. "But for a truth, I think we have argued that subject threadbare."

"So do I, Patsy, and I'm glad you have said it."

"I think that we have arrived at a point where it is time to cease speculation and begin to look facts in the face."

"Good!" exclaimed Adelina, and even Fritz nodded an approval. Zita smiled encouragingly. Patsy continued:

"It is now ten-o'clock in the morning of one of the most beautiful days I happen to recall. We are, I take it, within half an hour's ride of the castle which is our prospective goal. I should say that we do not care to arrive there before midday, and therefore I suggest that we find a good place along here somewhere to rest a while before we complete the journey."

"Why not go directly there?" asked his wife.

"Well, for one thing, we don't know what time of day Count Herbert begins to sit up and take notice. We are not informed whether he gets up with the sun, or lies in bed and scowls at the universe and swears at all humanity until the middle of the forenoon. We haven't been told that he did not sit over a punch-bowl until almost daylight, and my experience is that, if one is not informed about such things, one had better wait until the man to be seen has been out of bed at least four hours, and, if possible, until he has had his midday meal."

"I think you are right about that, Patsy," said Fritz. "It is important that we should find the count in fairly good humor when we make our first appearance at the castle."

"It is so important," replied Patsy, "that I regard it as imperative. In fact, the success of our expedition depends upon that very small thing."

"In that case," said Adelina, "we had best take our luncheon somewhere out here in the mountains, and time ourselves so as to arrive at the castle about two or three in the afternoon."

"Yes, dear, that is my idea."

"You are chief of this expedition," said Fritz. "Whatever you say goes. Where shall we stop?"

"Oh, let us go on until we are within half a mile of the castle, or possibly closer than that to it. Then we can stop and rest and wait. I would suggest another thing, too."

"What is that?"

"That we do not again utter an English word—in fact, that from this on we speak only Spanish. When others are near us or with us, I will occasionally rattle off a lot of Romany to one or another of you. It does not matter that you do not understand it. You can shake your heads or nod by way of reply when I address you in the Romany, and in that way it will pass muster. Zita and Fritz, do you happen to know if the count speaks Spanish?"

"Yes, he does," replied Zita. "He speaks it perfectly. He is an accomplished linguist."

"But the people around him are not likely to understand it, are they?"

"I don't know. I wouldn't risk it, I think."

As has been already intimated, they were five days

out from the palace at Breslin. They had been three days within the limits of Cretonia—and the ten days' limit that the count had put upon his demands made to the king had only two more days to run, for three of them had already expired when they started.

Adelina and Zita were dressed in the same costume in which we saw them at the palace when they entertained the king and queen and others in the parlor of Princess Deehra's suite.

Patsy and Fritz had also transformed themselves into perfectly appearing gipsies.

Fritz's hair, which he always wore rather long, had been dyed a reddish-brown, so that when the sun struck it right it looked almost red; and that accounted for the blue in his eyes.

Both he and Patsy had stained their skins to the hue of Egyptians, and their costumes were masterpieces of tawdry gaudiness and cheap decorations.

They were as picturesque as could be desired, and they one and all looked the parts they were playing, and looked them so thoroughly that thus far on their journey their efforts had met with entire success.

Their mode of travel had been discussed at length before their start, and it had finally been decided that they would all go in the saddle, leading two packhorses with them, on which they would carry their camping-facilities, etc.

In a word, they represented a group of four gipsies who were rather better off in the world's goods than most of their kind were supposed to be; but their personal appearance carried out that idea, also.

At the towns and villages where they had stopped on their way they had entertained all who gathered around them by singing and dancing and by telling fortunes, reading palms, and casting horoscopes from the stars.

And they had divided up their accomplishments so that there was always something for each of them to do.

More than that, they had arranged so that neither of the girls would ever be left for a moment alone.

To do this they had represented so far—and they meant to keep it up—that Adelina, who was the palm-reader, could not read palms unless she had Patsy to help her; Patsy, who was the astrologer, could not cast a horoscope unless he had Zita to assist him; Zita, who read fortunes from the cards, could not do it successfully unless Fritz was at hand to lend assistance, and Fritz, who posed as the clairvoyant, could not go into a trance unless Adelina held his hand all the time.

By these methods they thought they rendered it impossible for any one to get either of the girls by themselves.

Neither of the girls could dance or sing unless one of the men played the accompaniment; and so on.

Just what they would do when finally they should succeed in penetrating to the inside of the great castle on the mountain had not been determined.

They could only wait and permit circumstance to guide them as to that.

In fact, they had no idea how they were to gain admittance to the castle at all, although Zita remembered that she had often heard Count Herbert express himself as deeply superstitious, and they banked upon that fact to admit them when he should discover that gipsy fortune-tellers of unusual skill were in his neighborhoood.

They continued on their route toward the castle until they were within less than half a mile of it; until they could see where the raised drawbridge and the iron-spiked portcullis frowned across the moat; then they came to a halt.

"Here is just the place for us to stop for a while," said Patsy, in Spanish, drawing rein and getting down from the saddle.

"Isn't it rather exposed?" asked Fritz.

"Why, man, that is just what we want. If only one of the men from the castle will kindly come out this way and discover us, and will then as kindly return and tell what he has seen, we are likely to be invited to enter, instead of being forced to clamor at the gate for admittance."

"You think that would be better?"

"Infinitely so. And another thing: If we should be fortunate enough to be *invited* inside the castle, we must not seem too eager to accept the invitation. In fact, it will be our play to demur at first."

"We will let you handle that part of it, Patsy."

"Now, now, now! Drop the Patsy and the Fritz and the Adelina and the Zita from this out. We must force ourselves to make use of our gipsy names only. I am Tricio, Fritz is Fernand, Zita has become Zara, and Adelina will be Arla. Don't forget."

Zita, who had been gazing steadily toward the castle all this time, now called out to them quickly:

"See! The drawbridge is being lowered across the moat."

"So it is," said Patsy. "And the portcullis is being raised. Some one is coming out. We are in luck."

"I hope so," muttered Fritz, who seemed to be the pessimist of the party.

"There are three horsemen riding across the drawbridge," said Adelina. "It looks to me as if that man in the lead should be your count, although I have never seen him."

"It is the count," said Zita. "It is Count Herbert."

Patsy and Fritz had not been idle while they were talking, and already they had the packs off the horses and the saddles removed from the other; and now they worked rapidly, so that before the three horsemen were near enough to discover their presence beside the road, they had made themselves appear as if they had selected that spot for an indefinite stay.

Patsy had lighted a short-stemmed pipe; Fritz had deftly rolled himself a cigarette, and the girls were busily engaged in laying out preparations for comfort, when the horsemen came around the bend in the road and approached them more closely.

Count Herbert, who was riding ahead, turned in the saddle and said something to the man who followed next to him; and that individual galloped forward toward them.

"He looks as if he was going to order us away from here," muttered Patsy. "I hope it will not be that. If it is, we must find a way to overcome all objections to our staying. Let me do the talking, and let Adelina assist me. Fritz, you and Zita busy yourselves with the camp things, and appear to be unconscious of the presence of strangers—unless you are addressed directly."

And so Fritz and Zita bent over the things that were already spread on the ground at the roadside, arranging them here and there, as if they were intending to remain at that spot for an indefinite time, while Patsy and Adelina stood side by side, near the roadway, and calmly watched the approaching horsemen, while they seemed to be talking together about him.

He was not long in arriving at the spot where they waited, and, drawing rein, he demanded, in the language of the country:

"Who are you, and what are you doing here? Don't you know that strangers are not permitted so near the castle without special permission from the count?"

CHAPTER IX.

COUNT HERBERT AND HIS STRONGHOLD.

Patsy removed with a flourish the gaudy cap he wore, and, giving it a graceful swing, bowed almost to the ground, while Adelina used her most dazzling smile, and curtsied.

"It is that very permission which we hoped to obtain, excellencio," said Patsy.

But it appeared as if the man had not heard him at all. He sat upon his horse as one stupefied, dazzled by the beauty of Adelina, who was still smiling upon him.

For an instant he remained so, and then, without a word, he wheeled his horse about and dashed back again toward the count.

Our friends could see that he was talking rapidly in a low tone to his master, and Patsy had not a doubt that he was discoursing upon the wonderful beauty of the gipsy girl he had seen.

Indeed, it appeared, a moment later, as if Patsy was correct, for the three men rode forward again, paused until they were all there in front of Patsy and Adelina.

Now, in reply to a short command uttered by Patsy, Fritz and Zita half-turned and saluted the horsemen, after which they resumed their occupations. Patsy and his wife remained as they had been.

During this little byplay the count was sitting straight in his saddle, with his fierce eyes, which gradually softened, by the way, fixed intently upon the face of Adelina. And there was no wonder that it was so, for her beauty was such, in the costume she wore and with the fresh mountain air fanning her cheeks, that it was almost appalling.

He had ridden forward until he was a little in advance of his men, or, rather, they had stopped their horses just behind him. Then, utterly ignoring the presence of Patsy, he addressed himself to Adelina in Spanish.

"Who are you, girl, and where do you come from?" he demanded, and his voice had lost all the harshness which those who knew him best were accustomed to hearing in it.

"I am Arla, your royal highness——"

"Bah! I am not a prince. Whence came you, Arla?"

"From Spain, señor."

"You are gipsies, Arla?"

"Yes, señor."

"Why do you come here to these mountains?"

"It is our annual tour, señor; and, besides, it is our honeymoon."

"*Your* honeymoon? Egad!"

"*Si, señor;* and theirs, also," and she indicated Fritz and Zita by a gesture.

"Two brides and two grooms, eh?" cried the count, and he laughed aloud, keeping his eyes, nevertheless, fixed upon Adelina. "It was a double wedding, I suppose; no?"

"*Si, señor.*"

"And this—this is your husband, Arla?" He jerked his thumb toward Patsy.

"It is, señor."

"You are very much in love with him, I suppose; eh, Arla?"

"*Segura, señor; como no?*" she replied. (Certainly, sir; why not?)

"So it is a wedding-tour, is it? And you wish permission to camp here, close to the castle, for a time? That is what my secretary tells me?"

"It is correct, señor."

"Why have you selected this particular spot, Arla?"

"Because it is beautiful, señor. The castle stands there so boldly against the face of the mountain. It seems so big and strong and wonderful."

"Humph! You are also something of a poet, I perceive."

"I will tell your future, señor, if you will permit it—some time; no, not to-day; or, at the least, not now."

"Indeed!" he was interested. "And how will you tell it?"

"I will read your palm, señor. I will tell you what has passed and what is to come. I will inform you who are your enemies and who are your friends, what to beware of and where no dangers lurk for you."

"By Jove! and if you can do that——"

"Ah, señor, not only can I do that, but Tricio, my husband, will read the stars for you, and cast your horoscope; and Zara will spread the cards on the table before you, and tell you everything from them; and Fernand, Zara's husband——"

"What! He, also?"

"Yes, señor. He is a clairvoyant. He goes into a trance, and it is wonderful."

"You seem to be a gifted lot among you."

"We are all descended from the kings and queens of our race, señor. We are of royal blood, and might one day rule among our people."

The count bowed mockingly.

"I salute your royal highness," he said.

Adelina returned the salute gravely and with dignity, and then, as if with sudden resolution, the count produced a card from his pocket, and hastily wrote something upon it; then he turned and motioned for Patsy to draw nearer.

"You are called Tricio?" he asked.

"Yes, señor."

"Take this card to the entrance to the castle. Present it to the warder at the gate. He will admit your party, and will otherwise provide for you until my return."

Patsy bowed low and smiled.

"We are not accustomed to housing ourselves beneath roofs, señor," he said slowly. "We are mindful of the great honor your lordship would confer upon us, but we were born with the sky for our roof and the stars for our night lamps."

The count frowned.

"You will take this card," he said coldly, "and carry it to the warder, as I have directed. He will furnish you with accommodations inside the castle. I have a fancy to hear what your beautiful wife can reveal to me of the future; to know what you can tell me by reading the stars; to listen to the maunderings of yon clairvoyant, and to hear his wife read the cards."

"Yes, señor. It shall be done for you. You have but to cross our palms——"

"With silver, you would say. Your palms shall be filled with gold, not silver. Filled, I said, if you but carry out your promises and read me the future."

"And should that future happen not to be all that you desire, señor?"

"Bah! It must be. I will make it so. Here, Arla!" He thrust his right hand toward her. "I will not ask you to read my palm for me now; but tell me if it is worth reading. Tell me that. You can tell at a glance whether it is promising or no; can you not?"

Adelina bent over the extended palm for a moment, then she raised her head and looked the count straight in the eyes, smiling her wondrous smile as she did so, and bringing the red blood in a flood to his tanned cheeks.

"I see a storm in these mountains, señor," she murmured, in a low tone, and speaking with a half-dreamy accent. "I see strife. There is fighting here. There is bloodshed—only there seems to be no injury to you, señor. You have told me that you are not a prince, and yet here is a specter grasped in your hand, as if you were a king, or almost a king. It is wonderful, señor; but I pray you do not ask me to tell you more just now."

"By the thunders of Mars, girl! you have told me

enough already to make it imperative that I should hear more. But not now. No. When I return."

"And when will that be, my lord?" she asked him.

"To-morrow—when the sun is at meridian. Tell your husband that he must take you to the castle, as I have commanded."

"He hears, your majesty."

"Bah! None of that—at least, not yet."

He wheeled again upon Patsy. "You will go to the castle at once?" he demanded.

"Yes, señor; if it be your command; and if we may not be housed too closely."

"You shall be housed as you like, once you are there. Call that other girl to me. I would have a word with her."

When Zita approached, in obedience to the summons, he looked down upon her long and searchingly, until Patsy and Fritz began to fear that he had recognized something familiar about her appearance.

"What is your name?" he asked presently.

"Zara, señor."

"It is a prety name, and you are beautiful, too; quite as much so, in your own way, as the other bride. Almost you remind me of a face I have seen in my dreams, Zara, but I cannot place it just now."

"Always, señor, there are dream faces that we know quite well when we sleep which we do not recall perfectly in our waking moments," she replied. "Perhaps in our dreams we have met and talked together. I have many dream friends, and you, I think, have been one of them."

"By heavens! I believe you are right, Zara. There is a something even in your voice that brings back that same dream."

"Yes, señor."

"And is the man yonder your husband?"

"He is, señor."

"What is his name?"

"Fernand."

"Come here, Fernand!" called the count; and Fritz left his occupation and stepped forward until he stood facing his old enemy, who would unhesitatingly have slain him on the spot had he recognized him.

"You have heard what has been said here, Fernand?" asked the count.

"*Si, señor.*"

"You are a clairvoyant?"

"Yes, señor. I see, even now, standing behind you, an old man who is even taller and heavier than you are, señor. There is a great shock of iron-gray hair falling almost to his shoulders; his eyes are fierce; his voice is great, like the distant booming of guns; there is the scar of a saber-cut across his left cheek-bone, and two fingers are missing from his left hand—the third and fourth fingers, they are."

"By the gods! My father. Go you to the castle, all of you. I command it. If I could return with you now, I would do so. But I cannot. I am called away imperatively. But to-morrow, at noon, I will be there. Go, and wait for me."

"If such are your commands, señor," said Patsy, stepping forward and motioning Fritz to step aside, "you will be obeyed."

"They are," said the count. Then he laughed, and added: "I take it that you are in command of this little party."

"I am the chief; yes, señor."

"These others obey you always?"

"As implicitly, my lord, as your own followers obey you."

"Good! Then, while you and they are here in Cretonia, you will give due allegiance to me."

"We will respect your wishes and obey your orders, señor, so long as they do not conflict with our own laws. In the present instance, your directions shall be carried out. We will go to the castle; we will deliver your message to the warder at the gate; we will await your return to-morrow at noon, and then we will endeavor to do all that may be done to repay you for the hospitality you so generously impose upon us; for it is a command, not a request, you make to us concerning that hospitality."

"It is both, Tricio," was the stern reply.

CHAPTER X.

WITHIN THE CASTLE OF LINMARK.

The result of that interview was that the count, instead of sending our friends to the castle gate with only the card he had written upon for an introduction, ordered one of the two who accompanied him to ride back with all haste and give personal orders to the warder concerning the four people who would soon present themselves there; and, with his secretary, he waited the return of the messenger, while he watched with interest while Patsy and Fritz repacked their possessions and adjusted them to the backs of their pack-horses, and otherwise made ready to continue the journey to the castle.

He watched until they were in the saddles and ready

to start, and until his messenger had returned from his ride to the drawbridge; but he passed the time in talking to Adelina, riding his horse up close to her, after she was mounted and ready to proceed.

"May a bride of a short time listen to compliments from another man than her husband?" he asked her.

"If they be truly compliments, and not impertinences, she may," was the calm reply.

"By Jove! A good answer. Then I may say to you what is truth?"

"If the truth be said in all respect, señor."

"Ha! You are enough for me; no? With all respect, then, may I say that you are the most beautiful woman I ever saw?"

"If I have beauty, señor, it is the gift of God, and is, therefore, worthy of the utmost respect."

"And your friend——"

"My sister, señor."

"Ah! is it so? Your sister? Well, the fact that you are both beautiful is not so strange, then, since you are the fruit of the same tree. Are your husbands brothers?"

"No nearer than cousins, señor."

"By my faith, it is near enough. It is quite a family party, is it not? And how long have you four been married, may I ask?"

"We still count the time by days—or even hours, señor."

"So? Time passes when one is happy, señora."

"Yes, señor."

"I have directed that you all be given the freedom of the castle against my return. Do there as you will. None will molest you, or intrude upon you. There shall be rooms with soft beds provided for your comfort, and everything that your hearts may desire shall be at your service. You shall be my honored guests, and it is because of the wondrous beauty of yourself and your sister."

He raised his hat and rode away, laughing as he did so, and there was an unpleasant ring to that laugh which brought the suggestion of a shudder to Fritz Heisau.

The four remained where they were until the count, with his two followers, were far down the road; then they turned their horses' heads toward the castle in silence.

"It would seem that more than half of our mission is already accomplished," said Zita, at last, more to break the silence that oppressed them all than for any other reason.

Patsy replied to the remark by saying:

"And the count will be absent until to-morrow noon. After his return there will only be the time that intervenes before the following morning in which to accomplish that we came here to do. The ten days' limit will expire then."

"So it will," agreed Fritz, who rode beside him.

"We will have until noon to-morrow to study the interior of the castle. The count has extended the freedom of it to us."

"Yes. I wonder, Patsy, if one very important thing has occurred to you?"

"What is that?"

"It has turned out to be a very easy thing to get *into* the castle; do you anticipate as easy a time in getting out of it?"

Patsy looked at him and smiled.

"Fritz," he said, "I shall begin to fear that you are a croaker, after a while, if you keep up this flood of objections. We must enter the castle, and, therefore, we must get out of it, when the time comes to do so."

"Ah! But can it be done? To me that drawbridge and portcullis look formidable."

"They are formidable; but did you ever hear of a castle that did not have its secrets, Fritz?"

"I do not know what you mean now, Patsy."

"His majesty the king passed an entire month here at this castle once, when he was a lad, and when the old count, Herbert's father, was alive and in the full swing of his power. It happened that the old count took a great fancy to the young princeling, as the king then was, and exhibited to him every nook and cranny of the grand old pile. The king remembers that visit very well, indeed, and before we left Breslin he called me into his chamber and told me all about it."

"Well?" The others were paying attentive attention by now.

"I think," continued Patsy, "that, when the time comes, there will be a way out of our difficulties, although they will not be without danger."

"Do you mean," asked Fritz, "that there is a way out without passing the portcullis and the drawbridge?"

"Yes. There is such a way."

"And do you know how to find it? Did the king tell you so that you can find it?"

"The king told me about it, as well as he could remember. I believe that I can find it. I shall make use of much of the time until to-morrow in familiarizing myself with the interior of the castle, at all events."

"And in looking for that secret, eh?"

"For that and for others that the king mentioned."

"The castle must be very old," suggested Adelina.

"So old, my dear, that the memory of man runneth not to when it was begun. So old that its ancient history is unknown—and there is no doubt that it

possesses many secrets that are unknown to this day; that have been forgotten, along with the history that was made when the first walls of the castle were erected."

They came to the moat, and looked down upon it from the backs of their horses.

They saw that it was wide and deep; that it was supplied by a mountain stream that flowed into it above and at the rear, and which flowed out of it through an iron grating at the western extremity.

But they were not given much time for this inspection, for the warder and half a dozen soldiers were standing at the base of the drawbridge, awaiting them; and now the warder stepped forward and saluted, although they could see by the expression of his face, and by the reluctant manner in which he gave the salute, that it ill became his dignity to pay such respect to a wandering quartet of gipsies.

They were received in silence, and conducted in silence across the wide, paved courtyard that intervened between the high walls and the castle proper.

Then they passed through a huge doorway, and entered upon a great entrance-hall, where stone pillars supported the high ceilings above their heads.

Directly in the center of the great foyer a staircase of stone ascended windingly on either side to the next floor above, and Patsy could see, through the dim light that penetrated there, that other stairs of the same sort ascended still higher.

Outside, the castle was shaped like a half-moon, with a tower at either end of it and another and higher one in the center. The body of the castle was three stories in height, and each of the towers contained three more stories.

At the top these towers were surmounted by battlements, each of which supported a flagstaff.

From the middle tower the flag of the country still waved; but from each of the end towers the Cretonian colors were prominently in evidence.

"To-morrow," said Patsy, in a low tone, to Adelina, while they were still outside the door and approaching the entrance—"to-morrow, or the day after, if we do not succeed, that flag at the center tower will be pulled down. It must be our duty, sweetheart, to keep it there."

Their horses had been taken in charge by henchmen of the castle, but Patsy had directed that the packs be brought inside with them.

They were first shown into a spacious room which was furnished with all the sumptuous elegance and richness of a king's palace; next they were conducted to a banquet-room, where three hundred persons might have been seated without crowding, if there had been tables and chairs there sufficient for them; then to a smaller dining-room, where they were told that luncheon would be served for them at one o'clock and dinner again at seven.

After that they were taken to the second floor, and conducted to two adjoining rooms that might have been boudoirs for princesses, so elegantly were they furnished, and here they were told would be their sleeping accommodations.

Then their guide, again saluting stiffly, said:

"The orders of the count were that you should be given the freedom of the castle until his return to-morrow. Therefore, go where you will; there will be none to interfere with you. Should you desire any attendance or service, or wish a guide to conduct you around the castle, you have only to pull one of those cords, and Molok will respond to it."

"And who is Molok?" asked Patsy.

"Molok is the chief servitor to the count," was the reply. "He will not be far away from you at any time while you are here."

"By which remark," said Patsy, after the man had gone, "we are to conclude that Molok will make it his business to keep his two eyes upon us all the time we are here. Well, so much the better. These rooms could not be better for our purposes, could they?" he added, addressing the remark to Fritz.

"No. They are all right."

"Come; let us go to the towers. We might as well begin our investigations at once, and I wish first to make a study of the lay of the land from the tops of the towers."

"That reminds me, Patsy——"

"Hush! Call me Tricio."

"That reminds me that, when we are ready to make our escape—perhaps with a prisoner to care for and to take with us, if we are fortunate—we will be without horses, for ours are now in the stables that belong to the castle, and we could not get them outside without lowering the drawbridge, no matter how fortunate we might be personally in that respect."

"My goodness, Fritz, what a croaker you are!"

"I only wish to see difficulties in advance, in order that we may be the more able to surmount them."

"I know; but I thought of all those difficulties before we left Breslin—as you will discover when the time comes. Now, I have a suggestion to make."

"Well?"

"When we are wandering about the castle, do you and Zara—see how I use the names agreed upon?—do you and Zara make it a point to keep always from fifty to a hundred feet behind Arla and me. Will you remember?"

"Yes; but why?"

"Because, if Molok follows us, he may keep an eye and an ear upon you and Zara, but he may neither hear nor see what Arla and Tricio are doing—*see?*"

"Yes."

"Don't forget."

CHAPTER XI.

AMAZING TELLERS OF FORTUNE.

We need not describe in detail all that Patsy and his friends accomplished during the remainder of that

day, and throughout the forenoon of the day following, in going about from room to room and from tower to tower, and from floor to floor of the old castle, inspecting it with all the care and thoroughness that Patsy could put into the undertaking; and we who know him also know that he was and is a master hand at that sort of occupation.

During all that time Molok hovered close to them, like a shadow; but, thanks to the plan adopted by Patsy, he never succeeded in getting near enough to the two who led the investigation to know what they discovered, or to suspect what they were bent upon finding out.

Not once did they call upon him for attendance; not once did they address him.

He evidently did not understand Spanish, in which language they talked together, and he mistook it, doubtless, for a lingo of their own.

That night, when the others of the party were sleeping, and when the hour was tending toward dawn, Patsy left his bed silently, and stole away alone, to make further investigation.

He was gone a long time; daylight was stealing through the narrow windows when he returned to Adelina's side, without disturbing her.

But if she had been awake and could have seen him, she would have noticed that a well-satisfied smile lurked about the corners of his mouth, and that his eyes sparkled with pleasure at something he had discovered.

"Thanks to the king's memory, I can see my way out of this mess, once we carry the thing to its culmination," he told himself; but when they had all arisen he said nothing of his expedition, or of his discoveries during the hours of darkness.

One thing he did say to them all, however, and that was this:

"You must remember, each one of you, to be guided imperatively by my slightest expressed wish. Our safety and the success of our enterprise depends upon it. Whatever direction I give to you, or to any of you, no matter how absurd it may appear to be, follow it out to the letter in every particular. Will you all agree to that?"

They did so, and Patsy was content.

"Whatever is done must be done to-night," he told them later, when it lacked but an hour to the time for the return of the count.

He came, with his followers, exactly at noon.

The blast of a trumpet from the walls of the castle announced the fact, and our four conspirators mounted to the summit of the central tower, to witness their approach.

It was with considerable surprise that they discovered his following, for he did not return as he had departed, with only attendants.

Instead, there were fully a hundred men behind him, mounted and caparisoned as if for war, and Patsy smiled as he remarked aloud that the count was taking time by the forelock.

He was evidently in an ugly temper, too, when he at last entered the castle and sought his own room, to divest himself of his travel-stained costume.

Patsy and Adelina could see from where they stood at the landing of the stairs, at the second floor, that it was so; Patsy had determined to keep out of the sight of the count until they should be sent for.

When, an hour later, they were summoned to the midday meal, they still did not see the count, who evidently took luncheon in his own apartments; but at two o'clock Molok appeared suddenly before them, and announced:

"The master demands your presence before him."

"Where?" asked Patsy.

"You will follow me," was the tart reply.

They were conducted to a large room on the lower floor, located in the oldest part of the castle, and Patsy's eyes glistened when he recognized it as the one he had visited during the night.

It was carpeted and furnished with the utmost elegance and display, and, notwithstanding its size and height, it had somehow been made to appear comfortable, and even cozy. The walls were strewn with pictures and oil-paintings, low book-shelves ran the circuit of the chamber, there was a grand piano, a pipe-organ, a harp, and many other musical instruments strewn about; rugs and skins were thrown over chair-backs, or scattered about the floor for the feet to rest upon when seated; altogether, it was a grand apartment.

The count came forward to greet them as they entered.

Whatever his temper may have been at the moment of his return, he seemed to be in the best of spirits now—but Patsy noticed, as they advanced toward him, that he had eyes only for Adelina and her wondrous beauty.

"Have you been well cared for during my absence?" he asked of her, taking her hand and retaining it in his grasp.

"Yes, señor," she replied quietly, withdrawing her hand, which he relinquished reluctantly.

"And are you prepared now, Arla, to complete the reading of my palm so astonishingly begun out there beside the road?"

"Yes, señor."

"Then we will send the others away while you do it. I have not the fancy to have too many listeners while my fortune is read to me."

"Ah, señor, I am sorry; but it is impossible for me to read your palm without the presence of Tricio near me. I could not do it."

The count shrugged his shoulders and laughed.

"And the others, Arla? Must they also remain?"

"I would prefer that they remained within the room, señor," she replied. "They may withdraw to a far corner of it, if you like."

"Are you, perhaps, afraid to be left alone with me, Arla?" he demanded.

"No, señor. I had not thought of that."

"Oh, well; read my palm, then, where all of you may hear what is said. Only I had a fancy that, if one did not hear another read, there might be less sameness in the various readings I am to receive from you."

"Let me suggest, señor," said Patsy quietly, but with firmness, "that Arla be directed to read only the future; that I, when my turn comes, give you the benefit of what the stars have already informed me regarding the immediate present; that Zara discourse only upon your past, and that Fernand shall confine himself to replying to such questions as it may please you to ask. In that way there can be no likeness between the tales we tell you."

"Good. There is my palm, Arla. Read the future for me," and he extended his right hand toward her.

"I will look at your left hand first, if you please, señor," she replied, and bent over it, without, however, so much as touching it; at which he seemed to be not well pleased.

After she had also gone through a pretense of studying the right hand, as well, she straightened her lithe body, and, looking over the count's head, she began:

"Your future is a strange one, my lord. From the birth of day to-morrow there is much of strife ahead of you. There is warfare. I see it. You have told me that you are not a prince, and yet I see you crowned as king. How is that? I do not know. But I see it.

"You stand with a scepter in your right hand, swaying it over the heads of the multitude that gathers around you; and you rule them with the power of your will, and with an authority that is absolute. How is that? I do not know. But I see it."

"Your power increases as time passes. You become great not only among the people who surround you, but also among the nations of the earth. Other kings seek your friendship, your favor, your help. How do I see it? I do not know. But I see it."

"And do you also see a marriage there, Arla?" he interrupted her.

"Yes," she replied dreamily; "but not now. It comes later; a great deal later. It is a loveless one, but it is a grand one, for all that. It seems to increase and add to your power and riches. She with whom you wed also wears a crown. That is all, señor."

"But tell me more! More!"

"Nay, no more, señor."

"Is she dark, or light, that woman who wears the crown?"

"She is dark; almost as dark as I am."

"Then by heaven——" He checked himself, but the glance that he bent upon Adelina was sufficient to tell them what he had in mind, and, in spite of herself, she blushed.

The count turned to Patsy.

"Now you, Tricio," he said, "tell me about that immediate present; and by heaven! if you do half as well as this bride of yours, who should one day wear a crown, you will do well."

Patsy took a step forward.

"Last night I studied the stars over the castle," he said. "I read in them a quarrel with one who is at present in authority over you, but whose yoke you have this day determined to cast aside. It is even now in your mind that you have thrown it over for good and all.

"I saw that the quarrel is about a young and beautiful lady whom you would make your wife were she not refused to you. I saw that her hair was golden, that her eyes were brown, and dark, and beautiful; but, as I looked, she turned her back upon you, and walked away, refusing you and all the things you promised her if she would wed with you. I saw you angered to madnes. I saw you swear an oath against her and those who protected her; and I saw, also, that it was because of this lady, and the incidents associated with her, that the future my wife has read to you is made possible. That is all, señor."

"Wonderful! Wonderful! Are you all witches, or devils, or what?" he demanded.

"We but tell what we see, have seen, and may yet see," replied Patsy, with dignity.

"Now, you, Zara. By the gods! If you can tell my past half as well as these two related the present and the future, even as I myself foresee it——. But try. Let me see what you can do."

Zita sank at once upon the rug, with her feet under her, and began to spread the cards between them.

She cut and shuffled, and had him cut and shuffle, and at last, having laid them out to please her, she began in a low, monotonous tone:

"You, señor, are thirty years old. You were born at midnight, as the clock was striking, so you have two birthdays, as one. There was a fierce storm over this castle when you were born, and a thunderbolt descended from heaven and tore away a portion of the middle tower.

"You were always wild and reckless and passionate. You fear nothing, respect nothing that interferes with your will. Once you killed a friend of yours in this very castle, in a quarrel, and it was afterward——"

"Witch, girl! How know you this?"

"I see it in the cards, señor. Shall I proceed?"

"Yes. Go on to the end."

"It was afterward given out that it was an accident; that the button came off your foil without your knowledge. The story was believed, although, when you struck your friend with the point of the weapon, he was unarmed, and——"

"Stop! That is enough on that subject. It isn't true, of course, but I will forgive you for thinking it is."

"There is a beautiful, dark-eyed princess here in the cards, who once came largely into your life. You did not love her; you loved another; but, nevertheless,

you sought to make her your wife. There is also——"

"That will suffice. That will do. I know about that past, and it is not necessary that I be told about it again. Now, you, Fernand. Have you been in a trance, and are you prepared to answer questions as well as your friends and your wife have told their tales?"

"Yes, señor," replied Fritz, stepping forward.

CHAPTER XII.

COUNT HERBERT'S DOWNFALL.

"I will ask you but three," said the count. "If you reply to them correctly, I will dismiss you all for the present, and to-night, when the castle is at rest, I will summon you here again. Now: Will the plans I have laid for the wearing of that crown to which Arla referred—will they mature and succeed? Answer that."

"They will mature and succeed, señor, unless something should happen between now and the dawn of another day to make them unnecessary."

"Good. That something to which you refer would be a letter received here by messenger. I do not think it will come. Now, the next question is this: Will I ever succeed in making the woman I love my wife?"

"No; the woman you love does not love you. She is promised to another, and will be his wife through life. She can never be yours. If it were otherwise, the plans you speak of would be unnecessary."

"Right again. You are a remarkable quartet. The third question is this: How soon may I hope to place that crown that is spoken of securely on my head?"

"If that incident does not happen that I referred to, then at once; within a fortnight; but the security of it? That is different. It will take many months to make it perfectly secure."

"Humph! I think you are correct about that, too. You may go now. This evening I will summon you here again. Until I send, you are at liberty. Tricio, you may remain for a moment. The others can wait outside."

As soon as they were alone together he said directly to Patsy: "You, like all your kind, love money, I suppose?"

"I suppose so, señor," replied Patsy, little guessing what the next question would be.

"Do you, perhaps, love it better than you love Arla?"

Patsy was startled. Then he smiled. He knew that he must temporize.

"No," he replied; but he continued to smile, and the count saw encouragement in it.

"I have a proposition to make to you," said the count, leaning forward in his chair. "There is gold in that safe yonder, enough to make you a rich man for life; there is as much there as your six horses could carry, with the rest of the loads they have to bear. If you will agree to the proposition I make you, I will give you all that gold—all that you and your sister-in-law and her husband can carry away with you on the backs of your six horses. Do you heed me, Tricio?"

"Better, perhaps, than you realize," was the calm reply.

"I will give you all that gold, Tricio, in exchange for Arla. That is the proposition."

"But, señor"—Patsy still smiled. It was policy to do so, and already he saw in this proposition the very best means of any that had offered, for not only escaping from the castle, but for taking the count away a prisoner with them.

"But what?" demanded the count.

"Arla is my wife. That is all."

"Bah! Your wife according to some heathenish rites as practised among the Romanies. I will make her my wife according to law. She shall wear that crown she spoke of. Did you not hear her say that my future wife was dark, like herself?"

"Yes; but she also said that it would be a loveless marriage."

"Don't argue; answer me. Will you take the gold and leave her here?"

"Arla will object. Arla loves me."

"Aye, perhaps; but she will love a crown better; and diamonds and jewels. I know women."

"If I should accept, señor," said Patsy slowly, with his eyes upon the floor, for he feared lest the count might see the gleam in them, "we should leave the castle at night, when Arla is sleeping and when others are asleep; when only you and I and Fernand and Zara are awake in all the castle, for the raising of the portcullis and the lowering of the drawbridge would alarm them; and Zara—but I would know how to manage Zara."

"Tricio, you are a man of sense. As for my men—my soldiers—I will give them wine for their evening meal, and it shall be of a kind that will make them sleep heavily. I will have the portcullis left raised, and the drawbridge shall remain down. There is no need to close them to-night. Shall it be as I say?"

"I will give you my answer when you summon us here to-night, señor."

"No; give it to me now. Then send Arla here to me now. I would talk with her."

"You would spoil all if you mention this subject to her now, señor."

"It shall not be mentioned to her at all. I will do nothing to frighten her, or to offend her."

"No, señor. You must wait till evening," said the supposed Tricio firmly.

"Well, be it so. Go. I will send for you when evening comes, and when I have made all the necessary plans."

Within the privacy of their own rooms Patsy re-

lated all that had passed between him and the count; and he added, when he had finished, and was smiling at the horror he saw depicted on the faces of the two girls:

"After all, the scheme simplifies all that we have got to do in a wonderful way; for the count will himself drug his men sufficiently so that they will sleep. We will have our own horses to take us away, and will not be obliged to travel several miles across the mountain to the place where I arranged that horses should be awaiting us; horses and five men to help us out of the country. When we get upon them, and are ready to go, with the count as a prisoner with us, we will cast off the packs and saddle-bags, with the gold and other stuff, and there will be nothing to stop us. We will ride straight to the place where the five men will be awaiting us—they are there by now—and our mission will have been accomplished. Do you not see it so?"

They did, after they had recovered from the horror of it, and it was decided to let the plan work out as it would, everything being left to Patsy.

It was not until ten o'clock that night that the count came for them. He did not send, as he had said he would, and he explained the moment he could draw the supposed Tricio aside.

"We are about the only people who are awake in the whole castle," he said. "The few who have not yet dropped asleep will soon do so. There is one thing that I forgot, however. The portcullis is not down, nor the drawbridge up. It will require the combined strength of all three of us to raise the one and lower the other."

"Then let us attend to it at once," said Patsy. "Arla and Zara can wait in the room where you received us this afternoon. How about the gold, señor?"

"It is ready for you. Is Fernand in the secret?"

"Yes."

"And Zara?"

"Yes."

"But Arla——"

"No, señor; we must drug her wine, that you will serve to all of us in your room. When she sleeps, Fernand and Zara and I will take our departure. If you are not good to her, señor, and do not keep your promises, I will return and I will——"

"Hah! Never mind what you will do. There shall be no occasion."

The portcullis was raised and the drawbridge was lowered by the combined efforts of the three men, the count's great strength supplying no mean portion of the effort.

When they were back again in the room where the scene of the afternoon had taken place the count begged them all to be seated around the table, and then, with the remark, "There is no one to wait upon us to-night. My servants are all drunk, or absent," he went to the buffet himself, and prepared the glasses and the wine.

Patsy, watching him, saw him put a few drops of a colorless liquid into one of the glasses, and later he saw that same glass placed in front of Adelina; but Adelina was in the secret, as were also the others, and needed no warning.

When the count had filled the glasses, and was about to take his seat at the table with them, Patsy exclaimed suddenly:

"What is that? I heard a noise, as if some one were in the corridor!"

He rose instantly, and the count also turned toward the door; and, as he did so, Adelina, whose seat was next to the one he was to occupy, deftly exchanged her own glass for his, so that, when he and Patsy returned from the door, the table looked exactly as he had left it.

The party had not remained seated long after that before the count began to show signs of drowsiness, and Patsy, rising, passed behind him, and prepared himself for action, for he knew that in a moment the count would be suspicious.

Suddenly Count Herbert's head dropped forward, but he raised it again by a mighty effort, and then, as if he guessed the truth, that he had been drugged, he tried to start to his feet.

But already Patsy's hands were at his throat, and the count was pulled over backward to the floor.

The table was overturned and the chair broken in the severe struggle that followed, but Fritz lent a hand, and the handcuffs which Patsy had provided for the purpose were soon fixed firmly upon the count's wrists. The drug, too, was having its effect, and by the time he was well secured he was also asleep—unconscious.

Half an hour later a party of five, one of whom was bound to the saddle, and was also held in position by a broken chair-back that had been tied to him and the saddle, could have been seen following the highway that led away from Castle Linmark toward a pass through the mountains to the northward. Within an hour they came upon another party of five horsemen, who were awaiting them with extra horses, although they were not now needed; and then they all galloped swiftly away through the night, heading in the direction of Breslin.

* * * * * * *

"What has the king decided that he will do with Count Herbert?" Patsy asked of Prince Rupert, a few days later.

"At present," replied the prince, "Count Herbert is in solitary confinement at the fort, and it has been given out that he has gone abroad on a special mission for the king. His majesty has taken possession of Castle Linmark, and has given orders to scatter the count's men all over the kingdom. I think the revolt is over before it began."

THE END.

The next number (No. 599) will be "The King's Prisoner; or, Patsy Plays a Lone Hand."

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TALKS WITH OUR READERS.

Fagin, Charles Dickens' malicious, cruel, and cunning old thief-trainer in "Oliver Twist," has his counterpart in the world of crime to-day, although it is not long, as a rule, before he is laid by the heels by Scotland Yard, and sent where he can no longer teach depravity to juvenile minds, at any rate for a while. It is astonishing, however, so the writer learned a few days ago from a famous detective, how many schools for the teaching of crime exist in London and other large towns, although the police are persistent in their efforts to check the evil.

In spite of laws and philanthropy there will always be street arabs and young hooligans, whose upbringing and surroundings make them easy victims to the temptings of the modern Fagin. These men, by offering food, lodgings, and pocket-money to the boys, have no difficulty in getting as many as they want to act as pickpockets and burglars, and soon transform them into "Artful Dodgers" by a little training.

The burglar of to-day finds a boy most useful in "cracking a crib." The boy can squeeze through openings and spaces which would be impossible to a full-grown man; he is usually more nimble, quicker, and more silent during a job than a man partner; and, moreover, by allowing the boy to enter a house and do the actual robbing, the cracksman has a good chance of escape in the case of an alarm being raised, well knowing that if the boy is caught his youth will save him from severe punishment.

A boy soon acquires the necessary nerve for the business, and quickly begin to take a pride in his achievements. He is systematically taught his craft, how to use the scientific appliances and tools of the safebreaker, and how to effect an entry into the most inaccessible of buildings. The fact that youthful burglars have been caught fully equipped with up-to-date tools and appliances proves that they must have been taught their business by some one.

It is the same with the pocket-picking business. The same methods are adopted, the same devices used, and the same scheme of passing and "covering" adopted in the majority of cases. These methods are old; they vary occasionally, but the original methods never die out, and are handed down from generation to generation. It is obvious, therefore, when the police see these hoary old methods of picking a pocket employed by youngsters of ten, that the children must have been taught and trained systematically. Very often children of tender years are much cleverer at the business than men and women.

The dreaded African tsetse-fly breeds largely in the banana plantations. Bananas being a staple food in many parts of the Dark Continent, the plantations cannot be destroyed, and it is proposed to introduce the jungle-fowl to exterminate the flies, beginning the experiment on the fly-infested island of Kimmi, in the Victoria Nyanza.

HARRY KEAN'S FIRST CASE.

BY VICTOR ST. CLAIR.

"Here is where you get your matches—all good—large box only five cents! Now's your time—don't miss it. Have a box, mister? Only half a dime!"

Clear and sharp the boyish tone fell on the ears of the passers-by. The scene was one of New York's crowded streets. But the rushing throng paid little heed to the ragged vender and his wares.

"Why don't they buy more to-day?" he muttered, as he moved through the jostling, hurrying, heedless mass of human beings into a street less crowded. "Here's your last chance—only five cents a box—two boxes for nine——"

The youthful speaker suddenly ended his sentence with an exclamation of surprise.

A young girl of not more than ten years, with her dishevelled hair streaming in the air and a look of fear upon her face, had crossed the street and darted into one of the alleys, closely pursued by a couple of boys several years her seniors.

The match boy had recognized the parties, and without delay he rushed after them.

Reaching the alley, he found that the girl had been overtaken, or else she had turned defiantly at bay, for she stood before her enemies with a look of fear and desperation.

"You sha'n't have it!" she cried. "I found it, and it is mine."

"We'll see, Nickie, 'bout thet," said the larger of the boys. "But stop yer racket, or the cops'll snap us all up!"

At the same time he made a swift swoop to seize a package she held in her hands.

Before he could touch her, however, the match boy had reached the spot, and the speaker was hurled back against the brick wall that rose just behind him.

"Don't ye dare to lay a hand on Nickie," he said, in a low, firm tone.

The other quickly recovered himself, and for a moment it seemed that he would attack the daring protector. His companion, too, was ready to lend his assistance.

"You can if you want to," said the undaunted match boy coolly. "But ye remember the last time I lifted yer?"

"What are ye alwus pokin' yer fist inter other folkses' mush fer?" growled the other. "She's got something thet's mine, and I want it."

"'Tain't your'n!" retorted the girl, who had now regained her self-possession. "I saw it first, and I picked it up."

"Yer didn't. I had kotched sight of it afore ye had turned the corner, but ye got to it fust—only a bit, though. A'n't I told it straight, Den?" he continued, appealing to his companion.

"Straight as a string, old man."

"Then ye'll jess go long 'bout yer biz, Hal Kean?" he said to the match boy.

"You won't let him take it away from me, will you, Harry?" implored the girl.

"Trust me for that, Nickie. But what is all this row 'bout, anyway? And see, the lads are comin' from all 'round. The cops will smell a rat soon."

Boys were beginning to collect about the place, curious to know what the loud talk was about.

"It's a pocketbook," explained the girl. "I found it in Spider Alley——"

"Ye did——"

"Stop!" commanded the match boy; "Nickie a'n't through yet. Go on, Nickie."

"I have told all, only just as I was picking up the pocketbook, Mike saw me and cried out that it was his."

"Let me see it, Nickie."

She handed it to him without hesitation.

"It's pretty well stuffed. I guess it belongs to some old gent with a big pocket. But we mustn't stay here. I see brass buttons up yender. If you want to settle this, let's go down to Dahlgreen's, or some place where we sha'n't catch the eye of the cops."

Harry turned to lead the way with the girl, whom we must call, as the others did, Nickie, by his side.

Mike and his friend sullenly followed, and a part of the crowd kept along with them, while the rest dispersed.

Unnoticed by the boys, a man stepped out from a corner where he had been watching the scene, and followed after them, keeping his gaze fixedly upon them lest they should escape him.

At last the match boy paused.

"We shall not be likely to be disturbed here; and we can't find a better place to settle the dispute. But in the first place, don't you know that this property has an owner somewhere, and it don't belong to neither you or Nickie, Mike."

"Go 'long, Hal Kean; we a'n't fools. There's the reward. It'll be big, fer there's lots of spon (money) in it."

We doubt very much in our minds, however, if the owner would ever have seen it had Mike Warden got it into his hands.

"I s'pose there are papers to tell who it belongs to, but we will find first who has the right to open it. We will just rig out a jury and do this just as lawyers would."

"Blow yer lawyers, Hal Kean; ye are alwus getting some big thing inter yer brain. 'Pears to me ye had better be a lawyer, whatever that is, than to be sellin' matches."

"I am goin' to!" replied young Kean proudly. "My father was, and just as soon as I get money enough I am going to get some big books and learn ever so much. But mother is expecting me home, so we must go ahead. Dennis can be judge. You won't skip thet?"

"No," replied Mike sullenly.

"Then you may pick six of the boys for jurymen, and I'll pick the others."

Mike quickly obeyed, for, to speak the truth, Hal Kean's word had considerable weight with his companions. Though ragged as themselves, and living in as poor a tenement as any of them, with an invalid mother to support from his scanty earnings, he seemed above his surroundings. There was something in the honest, manly countenance that proclaimed more than an ordinary intellect.

A striking figure he presented as he impaneled his mimic jury, his slight, boyish form clad in a tattered garb, drawn up in a manner that seemed majestic.

The unknown watcher smiled as he witnessed the proceedings, and remained a silent spectator of the scene.

This was not the first time Harry Kean had shown his legal tact, but he had never carried his purpose so far before. The boys were glad to act their part. It was a new pleasure for them.

"Now, as Nickie is on the defense, you must tell your side first, Mike. So go ahead. Isn't it all fair so far?"

"S'pose so."

"And you are willing to go by the judge's decision?"

"Yes, only I don't want to perlaver till dark."

"Then go ahead with your story."

"There a'n't much to tell. I was comin' up the street——"

"What street?"

"Peyton. Just then I seed this pocketbook a-lying in the gutter, when——"

"What gutter? Be perticuler in speakin'."

"Why, the guter in Spider Alley, of course. But afore I could get to it the girl stepped out and picked it up."

"Where did she come from?"

"Crescent Street; and as she came around the corner of that street, she could not see the pocketbook until she got within six feet of it, while I had seen it before she kem inter sight," said Mike triumphantly.

"Let's see," said Harry slowly. "Spider Alley runs from Crescent to Peyton Street. You kem up Peyton to the corner when you saw this pocketbook layin' in the gutter at the other end of the alley. Just then Nickie come down Crescent Street, and at the corner of Spider Alley saw the pocketbook layin' almost in her path."

"That's it," said Mike eagerly. "I got to my corner afore she did to her'n, and were a-looking at the wallet when she kem inter sight; but she were nearer, and picked it up afore I could get there. But I told her to let it alone. Now, who does it belong to?" and he looked triumphantly at the "jury."

"How far did you get toward it?"

"Oh, 'bout three steps."

"You hear all that, judge and gentlemen of the jury?" said Harry, to which they bowed assent.

"Now, Nickie, you may tell your story."

"There a'n't much to tell. It's just as Mike says, only he did not speak until I had picked it up, and I don't believe he had seen it."

"I had. How could I help it? I will leave it to the boys if my case a'n't clear."

They did not reply by words, but their looks showed that his case seemed clear to them.

"Very well," said Harry, in as confident a tone as ever, "you all understand it so far. Now, let's go up and see the ground."

"W'at d'ye want us up there for?" growled Mike. "I hev beat yer, so let me hev my pocketbook. More'n wot I hev sed, Den here can prove it. He were with me, wa'n't ye, Sticks?"

"Yes, and I seed the pocketbook myself just a second arter ye did and afore the gal kem inter sight, but I a'n't so mean as to claim it."

"There! are ye satisfied now, Hal Kean?" cried Mike triumphantly. "Hand over my property!"

"Not so fast. I insist that the jury go up and see the place. They always do in cases like this."

"It won't do any hurt," said Den Sticks, who, to speak the truth, rather liked serving in the capacity of "judge," and wished to hold upon his commission as long as possible.

So the entire party started at once for Spider Alley, and it may not be necessary for us to say that the man who was keeping such a lynx-eye on their movements followed at a respectful distance.

Reaching the corner of Crescent Street, Harry told Nickie to place the wallet as near as she could to the spot where she had seen it. Appealing then to Mike, the latter agreed to the position.

"So far so good. Now let the jury go down to the corner of Peyton Street, where my opponent stood when he claims he saw the wallet," said Harry.

The "judge" looked puzzled, and young Kean's "opponent" scowled, but the "jury," nothing loath, obeyed their orders.

"Tell me when they are at the spot where you stood, Mike," said the "judge."

"Bill Spooner is just where I stood," exclaimed Mike; "but I should just like to know wot ye're goin' to do."

"Can you see the wallet there, Bill?" asked Harry.

"No."

"Come forward three steps, as Mike says he did, and then see if it is in sight."

"Can't see it," declared Spooner, when he had done so, "and I'm jest the tallness of Mike."

"Just as I expected," said Harry, in his old, quaint way. "You may come forward three steps more."

The other did so, still to find that the pocketbook lying in the gutter was invisible to him.

One by one the other "jurymen" tried the experiment, with the same result.

"That will do. Has my opponent anything further to say?"

"It's a lie; I could see it," cried Mike, trembling with passion.

"That is for the jury to say. Judge, I call for the verdict. To me it is as plain as daylight, and there can be but one verdict. Nickie found the wallet, and big Mike Warden has tried to cheat her out of it. But it is for you to say who shall have it—the little girl without money, without a home, and almost without friends, or big Mike Warden, who is too lazy to work for a living and tries to cheat it out of defenseless girls. Does it belong to him or——"

"Nickie!" cried the twelve, all in one voice, before Harry could finish speaking.

"Look out! the cops are coming!" cried one of the lookers-on, who had gathered about the spot at that moment.

In an instant "judge," "jury," and crestfallen plaintiff in the case had disappeared as if by magic, as well as the spectators, leaving Harry and Nickie alone to meet the officers.

The latter, however, merely glanced at them, and rushed after the startled crowd.

"Oh, Harry, you are so kind," said she, with tears in her eyes. "Now we will have to find the owner. You will help me, won't you?"

"Yes, Nickie. We will go down to the——"

"I will save you the trouble in that respect," said a voice near at hand, and they turned to see him who had been a witness of the whole proceedings. "The pocketbook is mine, and it contains over a thousand dollars. I missed it from my pocket, and returned to look for it just as the girl found it. Before I could reach her the boys appeared on the scene, and then in the race that followed, I had hard work to keep her in sight. When you came to the rescue, young man, I was curious enough to wait the result of your interposition before I made myself known. I have been very much pleased with your course, and you are smart as well as honest."

The stranger was well-dressed, spoke very pleasantly, and seemed honest.

Without hesitation, Nickie held out the wallet. He shook his head with a smile.

"Not till I prove my property," he said. "I think our friend is too sharp a lawyer to allow me to outwit you."

We cannot blame Harry if he was pleased with the compliment, for it was well deserved.

The stranger easily proved his property, and he not only showed that he was a gentleman, but one of the ablest lawyers in the city. He soon found that Nickie got her living by selling flowers, and that Harry supported himself and an invalid mother from the sale of his matches. Their home was in a miserable tenement, though both the children evidently belonged to families who had seen better days.

"Well, my little girl, your reward shall be a home with me if you will come. My wife will be pleased, I know. And you, my young friend, I doubt not, would be most pleased to take up the profession I feel you are so well adapted to follow. Would you like to come into my office? I will give you enough to do to pay your way, and you can study all of your leisure time."

"Oh, sir, if I could," replied Harry, with sparkling eyes. "But I must have a better home for mother."

"I will see to that; so you will come, both of you?"

They did go, and a bright day was that for them. We would like to describe the steady industry and persistent progress of our young hero, how step by step he worked his way along until at last he was not only admitted to the bar, but into the firm of his kind benefactor, who never regretted the assistance he had given him. There was another glad day to more than one when Nickie, as he still delighted to call her, though she had a more high-sounding name then, became his wife. A beautiful and happy home rewarded their love and trust.

Harry Kean has now won an enviable reputation in his profession, for honesty and persistent energy is sure to win; but he will tell you that the proudest triumph of his life was when he laid the foundation of his future success in winning his first case.

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